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Summary

What if one fact changes in Season Two that completely alters everything? What if Felicity had a past life in Gotham that no one was prepared for, not even her? Canon compliant up to the episode 2X18 'Deathstroke' only Isabel never reveals her hand. Almost two years after the events of Season Two, Felicity and the rest of the team are still coming to grips with a recent trauma and Felicity is forced to confront her past in the form of Bruce Wayne and a possible future which has her leaving Starling behind and finding out who she is and what she's truly capable of.

Notes

Foreword
Author’s Note on Content

First off, there is a Pinterest for this fic. Included are various clips, locations, and outfits that inspired this story:

https://www.pinterest.com/cijingram/

It includes some very lovely cover art by Eilowyn and Federica; please be sure to let them know that they did a wonderful job. I've never had anyone illustrate a story for me before so I am incredibly grateful and humbled by their kindness as well as their talent.

Also, before you continue (and this will be repeated many times in the notes to come) this is an AU; a very accurate AU but an AU. If Felicity appears a bit out of character in comparison to her current incarnation, please note that this story occurs in the future after she's been with Oliver's mission for almost four years. In vigilante terms that's a lifetime considering that Oliver went from a rich douchebag to an ARGUS agent in months and the Arrow in five years, so take it with a grain of salt. I think you'll still recognize her but you'll also see a stronger and more experienced Felicity than she is now. Growth is inevitable so this is a story of her growth; both up to and beyond the events of the story. This is her story, not Oliver's and not Batman's; Felicity. It's not about them, it's about her.

Some of the events in the episodes starting with the 2X18 episode ‘Deathstroke’ have been either strategically altered or ignored entirely. Although Thea was kidnapped, Isabel never revealed her hand, and know that, although this story was written during season two and contains most of the canon in the series up to that point, this story begins in what would be considered season four. Using canonical characters and events from the various comic book series that encompass Green Arrow, Birds of Prey, and the Batman universe, an AU canon was created from the end of 'Unthinkable' throughout season three and into season four. Also, although the unofficial Arrow Wiki states the character of Felicity Smoak is 26 and would be 28 during this story, the actress is only 22 and very much looks it. In this universe the character of Felicity Smoak is based on her actor’s age, making her 19/20 in Season One and 23/24 in this story.

Again, this is an AU based strongly on canon but is not canon. Please keep that in mind. The age change isn't random, there is a reason for it albeit not an obvious one. If it bugs you then ignore it.
Due to the fact that the timelines would be impossible to merge seamlessly given the that the show, as of the completion of this story, has only been on the air for two seasons as opposed to 75 years of Bat history some of the Bat Universe canon has been ignored or juggled for convenience and some of the characters reimagined while still maintaining their essence. Sometimes instead of eliminating a character, I merged them with another, but did so to further the plot. The Outsiders never happened, the Birds of Prey hasn’t happened yet nor has the JLA, and some of the events and characters of Batman comic ‘The Resurrection of Ra’s al Ghul’ have had their timelines shuffled about and their characters and backstory rejiggered. Although it is an AU it’s one that (somewhat) makes the attempt to keep up with canon when possible and nothing was eliminated or ignored without a great deal of thought and debate. Just please read it and enjoy with no preconceived notions.

I dislike wordy notes and forewords at the heading of every chapter so the bulk of my author’s notes will be at the end of this work. I try to answer as many questions in my notes as I can just in case you’re reading this in some far off future where I’m dead or my ISP has changed and you can’t email me. If you aren’t a questions kind of person it doesn’t matter and you can just skip it. If you are and you want to get in touch email me at cijingram@wildblue.net or thedemonofmischief@gmail.com with the heading Re: Still Waters and Quiet Men. One of those will hopefully find me.

PS: The comments section of this fic is where the really fun stuff happens. It should be a story unto itself. Make sure to check out and read all of the comments after finishing the chapters; you won’t be disappointed. Feel free to join in on any of the discussions. One of my greatest pleasures is the exchange of information and hearing from the people who are reading this. It doesn’t even have to be about the story as long as your minds are engaged. This story is about making you think and see things from different perspectives and the comments reflect that.

Feedback is appreciated but not required. Even if you want to use the comments section for recipe exchanges, playlists, or rec‘ing other people's fics, that’s fine. Just have fun! Settle in, it's going to be a long and twisty ride!

Enjoy---Jen
Chapter One

Still Waters and Quiet Men

"Beware of Still Waters and Quiet Men for both of..."
A Starling Mystery

By JA Ingram
Cover art by Eilowyn:

Cover art by Federica:
Chapter One

“Oracle to Batman.”

“What is it?”

“Are you still patrolling near the docks?”

“Affirmative,” he said as he scanned the area from his vantage site high above the warehouses and landing docks that littered the East End of Gotham. It was a high crime area, popular with dealers and smugglers, but had been relatively quiet as of late since word had spread amongst the underworld that the Batman had laid claim to this particular part of the city.

“I’m picking up something…unusual near that area. Can you change your heading to East 44th Street and Lamb in the Tenderloin?”
“Are you picking up police chatter or an alarm?” He asked already on the move, his body flying through the air as he leapt from rooftop to rooftop.

“Um, no. Not exactly, no.”

Batman frowned, “Explain.”

“It’s the Watchtower program, um, something is…pinging the system.”

“I’m going to need something more specific,” he growled in irritation, his pace increasing as he neared the location.

“I wish I had something more specific to tell you,” Barbara muttered. “From what I can tell someone has activated a doctored version of the Protocol and is attempting to locate an FBI safe house location. There appears to be a Trojan in their version of the program that is pinging Watchtower their location and destination.”

“Why would they want us to know where they were heading and who are ‘they’ exactly?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that they were doing it on purpose; Trojan remember? As far as I can tell they have no idea that the program is telling on them much less leading them on a wild goose chase.”

Wild goose chase? “So they aren’t headed to an FBI safe house?”

“That’s the thing; it is a safe house but it’s unoccupied at the moment. However the program is telling them that a midlevel Mafia informant from the Bertinelli Crime Family is holed up there. As for whom it is, the system is tracking her on its own and sending me everything from traffic cam footage to private security feeds.”

“Her?” He scowled and mentally ran through his Rogue’s gallery for likely suspects but came up blank. Selina had left Gotham years ago and from what anyone could tell she was now living under an assumed identity somewhere in Europe and none of the other women he knew who frequented the shadows of Gotham would be remotely interested in the Mob much less one that was a leftover from a West Coast defunct crime family. That meant that there was someone new in his city and he didn’t like that idea one bit. “Description and location?”

“Tall, dark hair, black leather, carrying what looks like…a crossbow. That’s different. Great, why do they always have to come here? It’s like all the lunatics in leather got a damn package deal or something. She’s traveling on your 6 about half a klick away. She should be within sighting range right about…now.” He could hear Barbara mutter something unintelligible under her breath then a surprised squeak.

“What is it?” He growled softly as he sank into the shadows. A mere second later he watched as the masked woman ran along a rooftop across from the darkened safe house.

“A dossier on our girl just opened up. Damned if I know where it came from but I have my suspicions—“

As Barbara spoke the lights came on in the safe house. “Are you sure the safe house is unoccupied? I have lights.”

“Yeah. Oooh, aren’t you just a clever thing? I am going to have to call your mommy and get her to send me some of those new apps she’s apparently been working on.”

“Oracle, stay on point!” Batman bit out as he watched his adversary crouch down and begin her
surveillance.

She cleared her throat and mumbled a quick apology. “The lights are attached to the security system. The doctored Watchtower program hacked it as soon as she came within a certain distance to the target location to mislead her into thinking she was on the right path. My guess is the programmer designed it to cast a wide net so it would slow her down long enough to buy some time. It’s tapping into the power grid and sending out all kinds of goodies too. I imagine there are some really pissed off prime time TV viewers in that apartment complex because she’s got signals scrambling all over. And you better hurry because it appears to be on a timer. If whoever she had intended to play catch up doesn’t apprehend the target and turn off the signal within a set amount of time after she’s engaged, every single police scanner and phone system within twelve blocks is going to get a message to scramble on that location, guns hot.”

“Who is the programmer that has us and her running in circles and what does the dossier have on our crossbow enthusiast?” He demanded icily. He disliked being manipulated as much as he disliked outsiders coming into his territory.

“Helena Bertinelli, code name Huntress. She’s a former Mafia Princess who appears to have a well-deserved beef against the crime syndicate, particularly anyone who is associated with her late father, Frank Bertinelli. She got busted a couple of years ago but broke out and has been waging a one woman war against the mob ever since. She calls herself a vigilante now but she’s not afraid to get her hands bloody. She’s managed to rack up quite a few kills, all made guys or their associates, but if anyone gets in her way she doesn’t differentiate between cops and killers. She nearly took out an entire FBI taskforce to get to one of her targets so I suggest you take her down fast and hard.”

“Not a problem; and the programmer that has managed to hack our system and gift us with this lovely little surprise?” He growled in low tones.

“Um. A friend?”

“Oracle,” he growled warningly.

“Um, well, here’s a hint: Helena Bertinelli’s body count started in Starling City.”

Batman’s mouth tightened as he thought of a name he hadn’t uttered out loud in over four years while in cape and cowl and only rarely outside of them. “Has she contacted you directly yet? Patch her through coms,” he ordered.

“That’s the thing, this Trojan is set to trigger automatically and ping the closest Watchtower location. She isn’t necessarily in the system right now. Huntress activated the program when she tried to use whatever program she’s got loaded on her hardware. She must have designed it so that when Huntress used it she could track her movements from a Watchtower console…just maybe not ours.”

The leather of his gauntlet squealed in protest as his hand tightened into a fist. “You think that she set up a Watchtower for the ‘Hood’ vigilante in Starling City?”

“It’s Arrow now; changed his name last year along with his MO shortly after the Glades terrorist attack to reduce his body count. As for you-know-who,” There was a sarcastic bite in how she said it making it an obvious dig aimed toward him, “that would be my theory anyway. I don’t know anyone else who could get through our firewalls. After all, she helped design them, remember?”

He chose to ignore her sarcasm. There was a time and a place and he wasn’t getting into this old chestnut with her while engaged in the pursuit of a proven killer. “Find out her location and call Alfred. Have him pack me an overnight bag and bring in Red Robin then get the jet ready to leave as
soon as I finish dealing with our tourist friend from Starling City.”

“Um, Batman, you do know that they have email and even phones in that part of the world? Hopping a jet seems a bit--”

“She’s on the move. Engaging.”

Huntress had readied her crossbow to send a grappling line to the building across from them. Just as her line pulled taut, Batman sent one of his razor sharp batarangs out to cut the line, causing her to falter for just a second before turning on him in a defensive posture. It was all the hesitation he needed however. Before she had time to react he kicked her weapon out of her hand and over the side of the building while catching her jaw in a powerful backhanded punch that sent her sprawling. The fact that she was a woman didn’t rate much with him considering the amount of corpses she had already left in her wake.

He leapt on to her, gripping her by the front of her leather jacket with one hand as he deflected the foot that was aimed at his crotch with the other. He twisted her around and slammed her into a large brick smokestack and pulled her arm behind her in a painful move to ensure she could get no leverage. “Try it and you’ll lose an arm.” He said quietly.

“I thought the Batman didn’t kill,” she gasped with a chuckle despite the fact that her nose was bleeding profusely.

“You can live without an arm,” he growled. “So ‘Huntress’, what brings you to my city?”

“Revenge, justice, same thing you do only I have a specific variety of scum in my sights. You can keep all the masked freaks and lunatics, I just want what I came for and I’ll be on my way.” She answered. “In fact, you should be thanking me not slamming me against walls and being all ungentlemanly.”

“I’m no gentleman.”

“I could tell, most gentlemen don’t hit ladies.”

“Most ladies don’t commit murder.”

“The term ‘murder’ only applies if you’re taking the lives of innocents. The men I hunt deserve what they get,” she bit out.

He thrust her away, allowing her a little space but making it clear with his body language and alert gaze that he could take her down again with less than a thought. “Maybe, maybe not, but you leave devastation in your wake; collateral damage. That might fly in Starling City with your friend the Arrow but Gotham is mine and you aren’t welcome here.”

“He’s no friend of mine,” she spat out as she rubbed the circulation back into her arm. “As far as I’m concerned, he and that little gang of his are just as guilty as the men I hunt. If he wants to protect them from me then he can meet their same fate along with anyone who stands with him.”

“This is my city,” Batman growled, “I say who lives and who dies here so I suggest you go back to Starling City and take your issues up with him and his so-called ‘gang’. Gotham is off limits.”

She looked him up and down contemptuously, “What is it with you self-proclaimed vigilantes and the ‘this is my city’ spiel? It isn’t ‘your’ city any more than Starling belongs to the Arrow.” She advanced on him slowly, “You want your city to yourself, fine! Keep it! Like I said, all I want is my prey and you can keep the rest. As soon as my bolts find their mark I’m out of here.”
Batman glowered at her for a moment. “I tried to give you an out but I can see you’re not interested in taking it. Whether your tactics are justified or not, you’re wanted for murder, and if you try to take your hunt to my streets then I will take you down hard.” He took a step forward, his impressive height looming above her as he fixed her with a spine-chilling glare. “Get out while you still can, I won’t be merciful a second time.”

Despite her bravado he could see her throat work as the fear he so often struck in his adversaries crept over her. “What about Marconi? He’s who I was hunting; I tracked him to this location.”

“Marconi isn’t here and hasn’t been for a while. Your information is wrong.” He stated in a tone that would brook no further argument.

She looked him in the eye, gauging his sincerity, before taking the small handheld device from her belt and shattering it on the ground. “That little bitch! I did him a favor when I turned down that contract on his geek girl; next time I won’t be so nice!” She laughed humorlessly to herself, “Even with a crossbow to her throat she managed to screw me over. What is it with the Arrow and his women?”

Batman’s hand shot out and he gripped her by the throat, squeezing in slow increments as her feet dangled helplessly above the ground. “Who?” He growled, “I want a name!”

“W-What?” She choked.

“The name of the people contracting the hit!” He growled.

“D-don’t know! C-came through an a-anonymous broker!” He squeezed and tears slipped from the corners of her eyes as real fear changed her expression from defiant into a mask of pain. “I-I don’t do contracts! I turned it down!”

He bared his teeth and picked her up one-handed; bringing her so close to his face he could feel her stuttering, gasping breath against his cheek. There was still a chance he could be wrong. “The target?”

“S-she’s just some IT girl,” she gasped as she griped his wrist in an effort to save herself. “She works for him sometimes.”

“The name!”

“F-Felicity Smoak!”

Batman drove into the cave, already barking orders to Alfred through the coms as he was screeching to a halt. “When is the jet going to be ready?”

“I decided it would be best not to call them, sir.”

He slammed the door of the tumbler and strode towards Alfred who was standing near the console, his expression livid, “And why the hell not? I need to get out there ASAP!”

“Oracle tracked down the broker believed to have contacted Huntress, sir. For the moment the contract has been placed on hold. Apparently whoever the client was, they rescinded the original offer.”

“I still need to get to her!”
“I agree, sir, which is why you’re heading to Starling City on Friday,” the butler said calmly as he removed the Bluetooth headset from his ear and turned toward his charge. “You had a meeting scheduled there already so I thought it might give us a bit more time to prepare a dossier.”

He stopped short. “I am? Since when?”

“Technically sir, Mr. Fox has plans to be in Starling City to meet with Queen Consolidated’s Board of Directors on Friday but, as you are the head of the company, I thought that it would be best to add your name to the itinerary as to avoid any questions should someone ask why you were there.” He handed Bruce who was already stripping off his cowl, cape, and gauntlets a tablet. “Here is the proposal you will be hearing as sent by Mr. Fox along with background information on the key players at the company, an Isabel Rochev and Oliver Queen.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of Queen,” Bruce said absently as he skimmed the information. “Dime a dozen trust fund brat who came home and found religion by taking up his old man’s mantle. Heard he’s doing pretty well given all that’s been going down over there. The Rochev woman is the one I’m not familiar with but from what I heard she’s a bit shady; connections to less than savory overseas interests.”

“Indeed sir,” Alfred agreed. “However, Mr. Fox and Walter Steele were quite close, from what I understand, and although Mr. Steele is no longer the CEO he does have a vested interest in the company as his bank financed Mr. Queen’s bid to retain control. He requested Mr. Fox hear the proposal as a personal favor to him.”

Bruce set the tablet aside carelessly as he plopped down in the chair in front of the console. “While I’m sure this is all very important, I don’t have time to sit in some meeting that is probably going to go nowhere. I need to find Felicity and put a stop to this before she gets herself in trouble and I’d like not to have to involve Lucius if I can. He’s been a good friend to our mission over the years but when it comes to her—”

Alfred picked up the tablet and held it out to him, “I think, sir, you should peruse Mr. Queen’s file a bit more carefully before you make a decision.”

“Why?” Bruce frowned as he accepted the tablet again and began to read through the file.

“Many reasons, sir, not least of which is that the ‘Arrow’, as the vigilante is apt to refer to himself, only appeared after Mr. Queen returned from the island of Lian Yu, a suspected training ground for The League of Assassins.” Bruce looked up sharply but didn’t interrupt. As Alfred had suspected, anything connected to Ra’s al Ghul would instantly capture his young Master’s attention. “In fact, the first appearance of this ‘Arrow’ fellow, then known as ‘The Hood’, was when he supposedly rescued Mr. Queen from an attempted kidnapping. Furthermore, Miss Barbara was able to research this vigilante and uncovered eye witness accounts and some rather poor quality surveillance tapes which prove that this man has had advanced training similar to the type you received under the League’s tutelage.”

“So is Queen the Arrow or is he funding him?”

“I do not know, sir,” Alfred said formally although with an intrigued twinkle in his eye. “After all, five years is a long time and it is not unheard of for a, as you called it, ‘trust fund brat’, to turn himself into a costumed vigilante. Also, Mr. Queen was arrested on suspicion of being the vigilante but all charges were dropped due to lack of evidence.”

Bruce’s eyebrow rose ever so slightly as he scrolled through Queen’s background check. “Interesting. Any connection to Felicity Smoak?”
“You could say that, sir,” Alfred said, his severe countenance shifting into a slight but triumphant grin.
Chapter Two

Felicity sat at her desk as she did her best to ignore the fact that Oliver was in a meeting with that woman in his office right behind her. She was not going to look, nosirree. Isabel Rochev didn’t need any more ammunition against her and catching her peeking in on them would just give her one more
excluse to insinuate that not only was she Oliver’s whore but she was also jealous and with good
reason. One of these days, she vowed, pow! Right in the credit rating.

That woman was dirty as hell and she knew it. She didn’t like her, she certainly didn’t trust her, but
Oliver needed her and that was the only reason she hadn’t pulled the trigger on her yet.

Not a literal ‘trigger’, but a virtual one, she clarified internally.

She snorted. One day she was going to say that out loud in the Lair just to see the look on
everybody’s face. Then again, it might start a discussion about ‘The Thing’. This whole week had
been one big exercise in suckitude and the last thing she needed was to put up with Oliver, Dig, and
Roy attempting to be supportive while they sat around and clumsily talked about their feelings.

She heard Isabel’s fake throaty laugh and gritted her teeth in annoyance. She snuck a glare towards
Isabel, pretending to be busy with QC business while updating the LAIR system remotely from her
desk.

Part of her really wanted to march in there and tell Oliver exactly what she’d been up to for the last
several days but she couldn’t. For once he was actually proud of the job he was doing as CEO and,
even though they had lost a valuable contract (thanks to Isabel, she added snarkily), he had been
putting in the hours to try to offset the loss. She wasn’t going to take that newfound feeling of
accomplishment away from him even if it meant biting her tongue about Isabel and her little scheme
with LexCorp.

Through the reflection on her monitor she shot daggers at the woman. Swear to God, how she could
sit there and pretend everything was perfectly fine was beyond her. One would think she’d be
sweating bullets the second the scandal hit the news but no, there she was in Oliver’s office playing
innocent even as several key players in LexCorp’s Weapon’s Division were set to testify before a
Senate Committee on bribery charges and conspiracy; crimes she was fully cognizant and culpable
for. If she only knew how close she had come to getting a subpoena herself she certainly wouldn’t be
sitting in the next room with that cool little smile on her face.

She’d always kept a close eye on Isabel but she was rewarded for her paranoia and vigilance when
she managed to run across evidence that Isabel had conspired with an up and coming executive in
LexCorp named Sebastien Mallory to bribe a member of the Senate Arms Committee into helping
them get the bid on a weapons project. After they got Senate approval, QC was outsourced to
develop the communications software. The problem was that Mallory screwed up and didn’t cover
his tracks very well which led to an investigative journalist by the name of Lois Lane to uncover the
scandal and plaster it all over the front page of the Daily Planet.

Why were guys named ‘Sebastian’ always douchebags? She wondered silently. Plus he spelled his
name with an ‘e’ instead of an ‘a’. That was his parent’s stupidity, not his, but people with
purposefully misspelled names bugged the shit out of her.

Lane had been working on exposing Senator Miller for a while. She suspected him of everything
from perjury to using campaign funds to hire hookers but, when she got evidence that he was taking
bribes, she nailed him to the wall taking down Mallory and LexCorp’s Weapon’s Division execs
with him. Ms. Lane would have taken down Queen Consolidated as well if it hadn’t been for her.

Luckily for Isabel, Felicity had LAIR monitoring the security for all of QC’s servers, not just her
own private system. When she was alerted that someone was hacking QC she back-traced the hack
to the Daily Planet and was able to act on it immediately. Apparently Lois Lane or one of her techies
had just enough skills to hack into their servers but not enough to get past her firewalls. Without
alerting the hacker to what she was doing, she managed to block Lois’s inquiries while finding the
information she was looking for.

To be fair, Isabel, unlike Mallory, did know how to cover her tracks, just not well enough. She found some deleted emails and some off-shore accounts Isabel had been using as her slush fund and, after a little digging, connected them to Mallory. It would have taken Ms. Lane much longer to connect the dots but knowing the reporter’s reputation it would have just been a matter of time before she got there. Working quickly, Felicity managed to manipulate the information to make it look like normal correspondence between two business associates, erased any and all incriminating files, then led Lois straight to the then sanitized versions of what she had been looking for, exonerating QC from any wrong doing while hanging Mallory out to dry. Even if he tried to cut a deal and named Isabel as a co-conspirator, there was zero proof of it all thanks to her.

Not that she was proud of that, Felicity thought ruefully as she tapped on her keyboard. Although it killed her to do it she covered that woman’s ass because she knew Oliver would be implicated by association. Like Lucius used to say, as CEO the buck stopped with him. After all they’d been through the last few years; the last thing he needed was to go through yet another scandal. She thought about fixing things on Mallory’s end as well since she knew they’d wind up losing the contract if LexCorp did, but she decided to let the chips fall where they may and keep Oliver out of the loop at the same time. Besides, alerting him to Isabel’s bullcrap wouldn’t accomplish anything. Technically Stellmoor still owned half of the company so he couldn’t exactly fire her; all it would do is further erode their business partnership. Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

As for the scandal, the article had broken a week ago and it was still all over the news. The buzz was that Lois Lane was probably going to walk away with her second Pulitzer, Senator Francis Miller stepped down citing ‘health reasons’ and LexCorp had no choice but to give up the contract while they fought the charges leaving QC and the software they had developed out in the cold. Ironically enough, as far as Felicity could tell, Lex Luthor himself was absolutely innocent in any wrongdoing this time. Although he had a reputation for ruthlessness and playing fast and loose with the rules, it was Mallory who came up with this brainfart of an idea all on his own. Technically Mallory still had his job until he was either cleared or convicted but she doubted he’d remain employed with LexCorp long enough to collect on his pension and he’d be blackballed from working in the tech industry ever again. From what she’d heard about the man, Lex Luthor wasn’t exactly a forgive and forget kind of guy. Mallory’s Harvard educated ass would be flipping burgers by the end of the year.

If only she could see to it that Isabel was stuck manning the deep fat fryer right next to him. Poor Oliver, she thought. He’d been so proud of winning that contract. Now everything was…

“Felicity,” Oliver said from behind her causing her to jump guiltily, “call Gerald at the Marchioness and let him know to ready the corporate apartments for Friday and alert the board that the meeting has been postponed while we get ready for the meeting with the people from Wayne Enterprises.”

“Wayne?” Felicity asked in surprise as she rose from her chair just as Oliver and Isabel emerged from his office. “Why?”

Oliver flashed a triumphant grin. “We just got the word a little while ago that because LexCorp’s bid was rescinded, they awarded it to WayneTech instead.”

“But--,” Felicity bit her bottom lip in consternation. Fuck, she was wrong; this was what it felt like to be stuck between a rock and a hard place. “Um, can’t they contest that? LexCorp, I mean?”

His grin widened, “Luthor and his cronies are going to be more concerned with minimizing their
exposure in the press then fighting the loss of the contracts. Wayne had the next closest bid so we’re
dealing with them now.”

“But Wayne Enterprises can handle their own software needs,” Felicity said, her voiced tinged with
something akin to panic. “Why would they come to us?”

“Well, it’s a longshot but we’re hoping that Wayne, in the interest of appearing fair, will agree to
honor the original agreement Isabel had worked out with Luthor. After all, we were completely
innocent of any kind of wrongdoing and our proposal already passed the committee with a clean bill.
In fact, if they don’t agree to use our software, they’d have to start from scratch and any new
proposals from them would have to go back through committee causing further delays, eating into
their profit margin. All said, looking at the time crunch alone, we’re still the best possible option for
them. Besides,” he beamed, this time it was genuine pride that shown through and not the smarmy
fake one he reserved for others, “you know better than anyone that even if WayneTech is the top
tech manufacturer in the world, we have the better reputation when it comes to cutting edge
communications and software.”

“That’s great,” Felicity said, smiling despite her inner turmoil. It was rare that Oliver ever got this
enthusiastic about being CEO of his family’s company and she didn’t want to discourage him.
“Congratulations Oliver, you deserve it.”

“Well,” he turned to Isabel, his fake smile once again in place, “it was mostly all due to Isabel. She
got the ball rolling, not to mention the fact that we got Walter to call Fox and put in a good word for
us.”

“Oh,” Felicity said, a bit more subdued this time. She forced a pleasant expression on her face, “In
that case, I guess I should have said ‘Congratulations Isabel’ instead.” No good deed goes
unpunished, she thought miserably.

Isabel arched a superior eyebrow in her direction and offered her a cold little smile, “Thank you.”

“Speaking of which Felicity, since you headed the team that originally developed the software before
you left IT; I’ll need to coordinate with you later so you can catch me up on some of the software
jargon. In fact, I thought you could join Sanjeev during the Q&A so you should probably coordinate
with him as well,” Oliver suggested. “After all, we might be the mouthpieces here but you and your
team did the initial heavy lifting and I’d like to see you get credit for that.”

Isabel snorted, “Oh Oliver, stop fawning over the girl! She did what she was paid to do and the only
thanks she’s owed is her salary. If you want to ‘show your appreciation’ fine, but not in front of the
Wayne people. Besides, I’ll need your assistant well rested for the meeting.” She looked Felicity up
and down contemptuously. “Since she’s so dedicated to you and this company and obviously has an
affinity for working her way up the ladder, she could prove an invaluable asset.”

The sneer in the other woman’s voice sent her teeth on edge. “Meaning what exactly?”

Isabel glanced at her nails before addressing her in an off-handed manner, “Meaning Lucius Fox has
a thing for much younger women. He left his first wife for some bleach blonde cocktail waitress so
he also apparently likes his women a bit on the trashy side,” she said nastily. “Having you in the
room might give us a bit of an edge, so to speak.”

Oliver’s face darkened dangerously, “Isabel, I told you before that I wouldn’t tolerate--!”

“Oliver,” Felicity interrupted in a coldly detached tone that was so alien from her usual voice that
both Isabel and Oliver gave pause, “Would you mind leaving us alone for a second?”
He looked at her in surprise, “Felicity, I can handle—“

“Now Oliver,” Felicity said in a near growl. “Please.”

“Yes, Oliver,” Isabel said playfully as she squared off against Felicity. “I think its past time the two of us had a minute alone to discuss a few…issues.”

“That’s not happening,” he told them both. “Isabel, I--!”

“Oliver,” Felicity cut him off and gave him a significant look. “Let me handle this.”

“You heard her,” Isabel said with a smirk. “Now run along while the two of us have a nice little chat,” she added with a great deal of sarcasm.

“Goddammit,” Oliver ran his hand through his hair and looked at Felicity as if to communicate he had her back if she wanted him to step in. Felicity shook her head almost imperceptivity and flicked her eyes back to his office. “Fine. I’ll be right here should either of you need anything.”

He stomped back into his office and sat behind his desk. Felicity waited for him to click on the speaker before reaching over to her own desk and disconnecting the line. His head shot up and he scowled at her before she again shook him off. This was her fight.

Isabel, who had been watching their byplay with undisguised amusement, spoke up. “Oh, how very dramatic! Should I call security? I just had my nails done and I’d rather not get into a cat fight today if I can help it.”

“Oh Isabel, when I’m done with you the last thing you’ll be worried about is your manicure.”

“Meaning what exactly?” Isabel asked with narrowed eyes.

Felicity prided herself on be a reasonable and logical person. Of course, the last few years had changed her somewhat, the last six months especially. A person couldn’t live through what she had lived through without it affecting their aspect and outlook but, still, she usually thought of herself as a very temperate person. Unless, of course, you pushed the wrong buttons and unfortunately for the Cold War Cunt she just hit the bull’s-eye.

She could take having to eat her pride and pretend not to have covered that woman’s ass, she could choke down her loathing of the bitch when she made her little insults, but with that little aside, she just went one damn step too far.

Despite the other woman being several inches taller than her, Felicity stepped forward in one smooth movement and got into her personal space causing Isabel to instinctively back up and feel the full force of the blonde’s surprisingly devastating glare. “Meaning I’m done playing with you Isabel. Before I just found you tedious and a bit annoying but now you’ve got my full attention and, believe me, that’s something you might want to start taking very seriously.”

“Are you threatening me?” Isabel asked in an incredulous tone, “Because I’ll have you fired and thrown into the street before you can—“

“I’m not threatening you,” Felicity said quietly as she took another step forward, “I’m making you a promise that you can take to the bank.”

“I beg your pardon?” She sputtered with cold humor in defiance of Felicity’s deadly calm.

Felicity stopped, tilted her head, and clucked her tongue in a condescending manner. “Oh honey, for
such a supposedly astute businesswoman you really need to learn to do your research or, at least, take in an HR seminar.” Her eyes were hard as steel and the tone in her voice could cut glass. “I started in the IT department. I know how to dig and how to document. I could leave here right now and own you by dinner time in sexual harassment and hostile workplace grievances alone. I can unmake your entire universe with a keystroke, crush your reputation in less time than it would take you to open your email, and I can lay the groundwork to make it look like you were the mastermind behind every white collar Ponzi scheme and Fannie-Mae type Wall Street debacle to hit the fan. I can drop a dime to Anonymous and you won’t even be able to go to the ladies room without seeing a Guy Fawkes mask staring back at you. Your reputation will be kaput in the business world, no tech company will touch you, your own board of directors will forcibly retire you, and, after I do my thing, that Golden Parachute you’re banking on will turn into a noose around your swan-like neck.”

She paused to take a breath, “But if I take you out that way I risk smearing Oliver with the same stink and I like him and his family so, instead,” she stepped forward again, eliminating all pretense of personal space for the other woman, “I’m just going to Kick. Your. Ass.”

Isabel stumbled back a bit, suddenly taken off guard by the tiny blonde who had gone from adorably awkward to dark avenger in a matter of seconds. “I think not! This has been somewhat amusing but, I warn you, you will keep your hands off me or I’ll have you fired and then prosecuted,” Isabel voice warbled as her cool facade began to crumble. “I don’t give a damn if you’re Oliver’s bit on the side or not!”

“Oh, you won’t do a goddamn thing to me, princess. Know why?” She asked, her voice dripping with venom. “Because, despite the calculating and in control act you have down pat with Oliver, I know for a fact that you’ve been playing close to the edge for a while.” She eyed her contemptuously. “I might not like being Oliver’s EA but it turns out that I’m pretty damn good at it. Nothing happens at QC or on our servers,” she emphasized, “without me knowing about it. See, I did my research; I know every shell corp, every dead end off shore account, and every hinky little back room deal you’ve got going on right now and that’s just the stuff I found by barely skimming the surface. LexCorp weren’t the only ones playing fast and loose with the rules, they were just a bit more arrogant about it. You’re just lucky that I was able to cover your tracks, Isabel.” The other woman’s eyes widened slightly and, despite herself, Felicity couldn’t help twisting the knife a little, “Oh yeah, I know for a fact that you were hip deep in the kimchee with Mallory and the whole Senator Miller thing. It wasn’t pure dumb luck or the computer fairy that saved your ass; it was me. I could have buried you at any time but protecting this company for Oliver was more important to me than seeing how you look in an orange jumpsuit.” She let that sink in for a minute, “Still, the right file in the right inbox and you and your buddies at Stellmoor are facing so many Senate hearings in the near future that I suggest you start looking at real estate in the DC area because you’re going to be there awhile.” Her tone took on an icy registry, “As for this new deal you have cooking, now that LexCorp is facing sanctions, that little weasel Mallory is going to start naming names at any minute and you know it. You’re banking on the iron-clad reputations of Lucius Fox and Wayne Enterprises to pull your bony ass out of the fire only you screwed up; want to know how?”

Despite herself, or maybe because of the almost hypnotic ramble of rage being thrown at her from Felicity, Isabel asked, “How?”

Felicity’s eyes, usually an almost transcendentally bright cornflower blue, grew flinty and dark as her voice fell to almost a whisper, “Because the trashy blonde cocktail waitress Lucius Fox was married to?” She angled her head forward until she was whispering directly into Isabel’s ear. “She was my mother.”

“What?” Isabel turned, in the words of Percy Sledge, a somewhat whiter shade of pale.

“Oh yes,” Felicity said as she leaned back on her heels, hatred dripping from every drawn out
syllable. “Now, you’re lucky I’m just going with the theory that you honestly didn’t know Lucius was my dad, I mean, after all, not much of a family resemblance since he adopted me after he married my mom,” she shrugged and added, almost as an afterthought, “Also he’s black and I’m,” she waved a hand to indicate her blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin, “not. If I had to guess, you had your boy toy personal assistant with the hair and abs do the research on him and while he may be talented in other areas,” she swept Isabel with a scathing look of contempt similar to the one the other woman had given her earlier, “I doubt his office skills are what got him the job. And, point of order,” she said as an aside, “unlike yourself, I actually do know how to keep my panties on in the office so the next time you want to label me the office slut you might want to keep your boy-candy at home.” She watched as Isabel’s creamy complexion flushed a ruddy shade of what was known as ‘color me humiliated’ red.

She soldiered on, “Had you actually bothered to look into it yourself it wouldn’t have been all that hard to connect the dots. It isn’t exactly a well-kept secret.” She stepped forward and laid a gentle hand on Isabel’s shoulder causing the other woman to flinch, “In other words, you were just being your usual delightful self but, if I thought for even one second that the little aside you made for Oliver’s benefit held even the slightest note that you, with malicious knowledge and forethought, both maligned my dead mother while suggesting I pimp myself out to the only father I have ever known I would gladly, and with great abandonment and joyful exuberance, tear your goddamn throat out with my teeth.”

The other woman licked her lips, looking decidedly less arrogant than she had just moments ago. “What are you planning on doing with that information?” Isabel asked her quietly.

“I don’t know; I could out you to Oliver, the board of directors, my dad and Stellmoor then send you to the Federal Pen, but what’s the fun in that?” Again, she leaned back and grinned giving the other woman a glimpse of said pearly whites before doing a half turn and sending a little wave to Oliver who was studying them intently through the glass walls separating their offices. “Smile and wave, Isabel, unless you want to have to explain this to Oliver.” She said through clenched teeth. The other woman smiled faintly and waved distractedly to him as he arose from his chair and began to straighten his jacket. “Oops, looks like he’s on the move so I’m afraid we’ll have to cut this short.” She paused then turned toward Oliver who had his hand on the door of his office and held up a single finger indicating they need a bit more time. His expression darkened and he let go of the pull but continued to stare at them with a deepening scowl.

“What do you want?” Isabel asked her, her eyes flicking towards Oliver.

“What do I want?” She sighed then turned back to her adversary. “Isabel, you are a woman who doesn’t get subtle so here’s what’s going to happen; I’m going to smack you a good one and you’re going to take it. Then you are going to walk out of this office like nothing ever happened and, starting tomorrow, after you’ve applied copious amounts of concealer, you will adopt a warm and pleasant demeanor in my presence. You will also watch your step from here on out because I’m going to be on top of you like white on rice, got that?” She turned a hard eye on her, “We will never speak of this again and Oliver need never know about any of this; not LexCorp, not my relationship to Lucius Fox, and not why you’re about to be laid out on the floor thirty seconds from now. Am I clear?”

“Crystal,” Isabel agreed, jaw locked and shoulder’s braced as she prepared for what she probably assumed would be an unpleasant but not too painful smack by a tiny little blonde thing.

Yeah, too bad for her Felicity trained with two bruisers twice her weight with a foot or more of height advantage who didn’t believe in coddling.
“Excellent,” Felicity smiled, and with a one-two punch worthy of the teachings of John Diggle, Sara Lance, and Oliver Queen, she laid her out cold.

“What the fuck?!” Oliver shouted as he erupted from his office and looked at Isabel sprawled out on the floor, her skirt and slip bunched up at her waist, panties flashing, as she lay sprawled across the carpeting. “Felicity, what the hell did you do?”

Felicity rubbed her knuckles and looked down at her hand with a frown. “Ow.”

As Isabel began to stir he leaned over her and helped her into a sitting position, “Isabel, are you okay? Look, we can work something out. Felicity didn’t mean--!”

“Shut up, Oliver,” Isabel garbled as she rubbed her hand along her jaw line and struggled to get to her feet. She wobbled for a moment before addressing Felicity directly. “I take it…that our business here is concluded then?”

Felicity nodded and said in a professional and pleasant tone, “I’ll call to make the reservations and have the necessary research emailed to your assistant by noon tomorrow.”

“Email it to me directly; I may be looking for a new assistant soon.” She wobbled to the door, “I’ll see you tomorrow then. Goodnight Oliver, Ms. Smoak.”

“Ms. Rochev,” Felicity nodded.

Isabel turned to look at her, makeup smeared, her jaw already swelling as the bruise began to bloom on her cheek, and smiled just slightly as she continued to rub her face. “I appreciate the initiative you’ve shown me, Ms. Smoak. Maybe when this meeting is done you and I could do lunch?”

“Only if you’re buying,” Felicity said mirroring Isabel’s own pleasant and measured tone.

“Heh, done. Goodnight.” She waved then shut the door behind her as she went.

Oliver stood in the center of the room, mouth agape. He stared at the closed door, then to Felicity, and then back to the spot on the floor where an insentient Isabel lay just moments before. Finally, just as Felicity had begun to gather her purse and jacket, he spoke, “Felicity, what the fuck was that? What were you thinking? You punched Isabel! TWICE!”

“Yeah,” she breathed, “and it felt fucking fantastic. Goodnight Oliver.”

“Goddammit Felicity!” He erupted, “Where the hell do you think you’re going? We have to talk about what happened!”

“Tomorrow, tonight I’m going home to watch TV while I ice down my knuckles so I can type up that research in the morning.”

“Goddamn it! If Isabel goes to the board or, God forbid, decides to press charges--!”

“Like I said: Goodnight Oliver!” Felicity called out just before she left, closing the door on a red-faced and utterly confused Oliver Queen.

“She did what?!” Diggle exclaimed in a combination of disbelief and utter delight.

“You heard me: two hits, uppercut and a jab right to the face.”
“God damn,” Diggle breathed as he leaned back in Felicity’s chair at her workstation in the Lair. “Tell me you got that shit on tape, a security camera, something?”

“I don’t know, I’ll have to ask Felicity,” Oliver ran his hands through his hair in a gesture of frustration. “Fuck, if Isabel presses charges or goes to the board with allegations that she was attacked by my assistant I don’t think there’s any way I can protect her job. This is a fucking nightmare! Why now? What the hell set her off? I mean, yeah, Isabel was way the fuck out of line but I was handling it!”

Diggle continued to grin as he imagined the scene playing out. “Eh, it’ll blow over, don’t worry about it.”

Oliver looked at him utterly speechless for a moment. “Don’t worry about it?! She punched Isabel in the face!”

“So you lie. Tell the cops nothing happened, have Felicity do her voodoo with the tapes, and I’ll back you up and say I was there and nothing happened,” Diggle shrugged then added, “but have her save a copy because I have got to see the playback at least once before she gets rid of it.”

“It’s not funny, Dig!” Oliver scowled. “If I have to fire Felicity because Isabel forces my hand not only will that further erode my standing with the Board but it will severely restrict how much contact I can have with her. I mean, how will I explain to people that my former assistant who I had to fire because she committed criminal assault on a major shareholder is still coming into the club night after night? It was hard enough before, but now?” He rubbed his hand over his mouth then scratched at the stubble on his throat in a gesture of agitation, “Maybe…maybe it’s all finally catching up to her.”

“What?” Dig asked with a confused frown until Oliver shot him a withering glare, “Oh, that.”

“Yeah, that,” Oliver said with a humorless bark of laughter.

“I thought Felicity had taken to calling it ‘The Thing’,” Dig said.

“Not funny,” Oliver told him.

The other man sighed, “Look, it’s been almost six months. If she was going to have a breakdown it would have already happened by now,” he said reasonably.

“Maybe,” Oliver said gruffly. “The thing is, while the rest of us were recuperating she never stopped moving, she never even took a weekend to, I don’t know, decompress. She just kept going; working on rebuilding the Lair, covering for me and practically running QC singlehandedly, visiting all of us in the hospital. Hell, she even watered Lance’s fucking plants because he told her Laurel had a black thumb and killed them the last time he was laid up. Maybe…maybe I pushed her too hard. I don’t know; maybe all of this is my fault for not making her take some time to herself.”

“It’s not a nervous breakdown, Oliver,” Dig said with a note of exasperation. “Besides, if you made her take a vacation she’d just use it to stay here in the Lair updating the systems or installing equipment. If she was having trouble coping with what went down she’d tell us.”

“Would she?” Oliver asked with a frown.

“Yeah, of course,” Dig said, although there was a hint of doubt in his tone.

“Has she…talked to you about anything?” He didn’t have to specify what it was he was referring to.

Dig shook his head, his features going still for a moment. “No, but she would have. She talks to me
more than anybody else on the team. There is no doubt in my mind that if this was related to that she’d have told me by now,” his voice gained in assurance as though he had succeeded in convincing himself as well as Oliver of the truth behind his words. He smiled again, the mood suddenly lifting, “You ask me this was just one of those ‘camel’s back meets straw’ moments she’s always threatening us with.”

“Felicity and that poor camel’s back, huh?” Oliver asked wryly.

“That’s what I’m thinking and, face it; this has been a long time coming. Hell, if I was Felicity I would have knocked her on her ass years ago. Worst case scenario you hire Felicity to be your head of HR or assistant manager at Verdant, something to justify her presence and a paycheck, and you just weather through. Hell, if I were you I’d just say screw it and marry the woman!” Diggle chuckled. “Damn, laid her out, huh? That must have been a thing of beauty, wished I could have seen it.”

Despite himself Oliver felt the corners of his lips twitch upward. “I was too busy trying to keep my eyes from bugging out of head to notice at the time, but yeah. The weirdest part was that when Isabel got up she pretended like nothing had happened. She even gave her a compliment and invited her to lunch.”

“And they spent how many minutes just talking before that?”

“A good five minutes, maybe less.”

Diggle grunted, deep in thought, “And they just talked? No yelling or hair pulling or anything?”

“Felicity pulled the cord to the intercom but, as far as I could see, no.”

“Huh?” Diggle shrugged, “I guess the Heartbreak Kid was right; bitches be crazy.”

“Yeah, I don’t think you’ll want to say that in front of Felicity any time soon,” Oliver said as he rubbed the stubble of his beard with a chuckle, his earlier anxiety over Felicity’s actions all but forgotten due to the other man’s assurances.

“Yeah, she’d probably lay me out too!” He guffawed. “C’mon, let’s hit the sticks today.”

Oliver got up from where he had been leaning against the workstation and followed him into the training area. “You know, still; despite how Isabel seemed to handle it, I just can’t shake the feeling that something bad is hanging over the horizon and Felicity is going to wind up caught right in the middle of it.”
Chapter Three

After a quick stop to the pharmacy for some ice packs and elastic bandages (it’s amazing how fast she went through those things these days. She even got a membership to one of those buy in bulk price clubs so she could stock up on OTC pain relievers and first aid supplies) and a trip to her favorite food allergy aware Chinese take-away, she headed home, shucked off her corporate uniform, and snuggled down into her finest fuzzy PJs and pan fried noodles. She reached over to the blinking light on her landline and slapped it to play her messages while she decided what to watch on her DVR.

//FIRST MESSAGE// the slightly feminine automated voice of her answering machine called out. “Hello. This is an automated message reminding you FELICITY SMOAK to vote on Tuesday for __.”

“Delete,” she muttered. Yeah, civic duty or not, she lost her taste for politics after the whole Blood Army thing a couple of years ago. She filled out an absentee ballot for Walter a few weeks ago but
there was no way in hell she was going to the polls.

“Hey Baby, it’s Daddy. I’m stuck in a dinner meeting that’s running late so I missed your message. I tried calling you but, well. Anyway, yes I am planning on coming down on Friday and I know you don’t want to make a big deal about the whole, ‘My dad is the ‘Businessman’s Businessman’ thing,’” she snorted even though it was kind of true. Lucius Fox had an almost legendary reputation in the tech community both as an innovator and as a financial wizard. He hated it when she went back to using the last name ‘Smoak’ but understood why. Felicity had learned a long time ago that people who were desperate to get the attention of Lucius Fox would try to use her connection to him for their own gain and she wanted to succeed on her own. He didn’t like it, or the hours she worked, not to mention the infrequent visits home, but he understood and respected her for it, “but I thought you could meet me at the hotel for brunch on Saturday before I left back out.” He sighed, “You know, I’m so proud of you Baby, but I hate that we never get to see each other these days. I know that Queen boy has a mess on his hands but I miss my little girl. Oh, and your brother said to send him another care package, only next time, and I quote, ‘send more junk food and less healthy crap’ because they apparently don’t have enough of that sort of thing in the Congo. Don’t worry about him though. According to Tam he sent the same message to her so she sent him bulk packages of wheat germ and something called ‘Frookies’. I asked her what the devil a ‘Frookie’ was and she said it’s some kind of fruit juice sweetened tofu cookie.” She could practically hear him shudder at the thought. “I told her when I get ready for the nursing home that you’re in charge of menu planning.Oops, they’re waving me back in. Love you, Baby. See you Friday.”

“Love you too, Daddy,” she said as she deleted his message. She really had to speak to Oliver soon about cashing in a few vacation days. Between QC and Team Arrow the only down time she ever seemed to get is the occasional sleep-in after a concussion.

Not that she would or could ever explain that to her dad.

“Hello Former Brentwood Prep Graduate! This is Barbara Gordon, Prom Queen and Editor of the Gotham Watchtower calling to remind you of our Class Reunion on--.”

“Whoa!” Felicity hit delete, shut off the TV, and grabbed her tablet and headset before patching a secure call into Watchtower. As soon as it connected she looked into the eyes of Barbara Gordon and practically shouted, “What the hell, Barbara?!”

“Oh, so you got my message?” The redhead smirked at her through the monitor.

“What’s going on?” Felicity asked, perturbed. Not that she didn’t love hearing from Barbara but hearing her use their emergency code through her answering machine had put her into a bit of a tailspin. “Is it bad? What’s happening?”

“It’s bad, but not Joker-bad so relax.” Barbara paused, “Well, on second thought, it might be worse than that actually. Although Joker is dead so…ooh, Zombie Joker? Yeah, that would be a whole other level of suck…”

“Is everyone okay?” She said ‘everyone’ even though Barbara gave her that look that said she knew exactly who Felicity was referring to. She flushed and tried to deflect even though she knew it was futile. Barbara knew her too well. “How’s Dick?”

“Being, well, a ‘dick’,” Barbara sighed.

Felicity winced, “Yeah, I heard he left Bludhaven to Tim and went off on his own a while back but Tim said he’d come back a few times since then. I wasn’t sure you two had officially broken up.”
“Oh, we didn’t,” Barbara said with a tight smile. “No, he was very clear on the fact that he was ‘breaking up’ with Bruce but that he still loved me before pointing out that I was ‘vital to the mission’ so he couldn’t ask me to go with him. He told me we just needed a ‘little break’ until he got his bearings.”

“And did he?”

“Oh yeah,” she said, “And—surprise!—the super-Chickie handling his ‘bearings’ is another redhead. Her name’s ‘Kori’ but her codename is ‘Starfire’, cute huh? Bitch sounds like a fucking character out of ‘My Pretty Pony’. Oh, and get this, she’s an alien princess with golden skin who’s like a foot taller than he is and her hair is literally made of fire.”

“Huh,” Felicity pursed her lips, “doesn’t that make, well, stuff difficult? Like showering and other… stuff?”

“Nope! From what I can tell he’s stuffing her just fine!” She snarked, “Besides, her hair only does that when she’s flying. Did I mention that yet? She can fly too. She’s just so flippin’ nifty that way, apparently.” She snorted, before her voice grew contemplative, “I wonder if all of her hair does that or just the bit on her head? Eh, what do I care if he gets his weenie roasted? I’m done.”

“Ouch,” she said with a sympathetic wince. She loved Dick but… “Yeah, he’s…yeah, ‘dick’ pretty much covers it.” Felicity agreed as she tried to get a mental picture only to fail miserably. “I’m sorry I’ve been out of touch the last several months. It’s just been…it’s been crazy.”

“It’s alright, Chickie,” she told her. “Tim told me you guys hardly even have time to talk these days because your schedule is all over the map so I get it. Still miss you though.”

“I miss you, too,” she said softly. “Believe me, there’ve been days when I would have loved to have a friendly bitch and wine cooler session via Skype but life has been…” she sighed. “Anyway, what is it with Dick and tall redheads anyway?”

“Fuck if I know,” Barbara said, obviously perturbed. “I spent years with that little weasel pairing evening gowns with flats just so he wouldn’t get a complex and he leaves me for an alien amazon in stilettos just when I happen to drop three feet of height.”

“You don’t really think he left you because of the wheelchair, do you?” Felicity asked tentatively. She’d known Barbara and Dick both before and after the accident that left her in a wheelchair paralyzed from the waist down and, from what she could see, he seemed to be just as affectionate and loving as ever. Of course, in the world that they occupied, relationships could change quickly. She knew that better than most.

“No,” she sighed, “I know he left because of Bruce. I mean, everyone eventually leaves because of Bruce,” Felicity flinched at that, “but it still irks me. I mean, she’s like, seven feet tall! Seriously! It must be what a Chihuahua looks like when he’s trying to mount a Great Dane!”

Unable to stop herself Felicity began to laugh so hard fat tears began to roll down her cheeks. Soon both women were laughing so hard that Felicity had to grab some napkins off the coffee table and blow her nose before she humiliated herself by blowing a snot bubble. “Oh my God! Oh that hurts! Ow!” She clutched her stomach and Barbara caught a glimpse of her bandage.

“Girl, what happened to your hand?”

“This?” She asked, holding it up to the tablet. “Punched my, well, technically I guess she’s my boss, in the face.”
“Oh,” Barbara’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline. “Fuck me. You looking for another job, yet?”

“Nope, blackmailed her. She even asked me to lunch afterwards.”

“Okay, you now have my unending respect,” she chuckled. “Felicity Smoak, Bad-ass.”

“Well, you’re still pretty bad-ass too if you ask me.”

“Damn straight!” Barbara agreed, “I might not be ten feet tall and fly but I can still rock a Ms. Clairol Dark Auburn dye job like nobody else and I got mad hacker skills! By the way, still loving the hair, Baby-Girl. Did you go darker with the lowlights since I saw you last or is that my monitor acting up?”

“What, this? Yeah, how’s it look?” Felicity mugged for the camera. “Only my hairdresser knows for sure!”

“I like it! The contrast really makes your eyes pop,” Barbara told her. “I mean, I always dug your original color, but I can understand why you got tired of people making comments. Still, aren’t you living in the Land of all that is Blonde and Fake anyway? You’d think that if you could get away with it anywhere it’d be on the West Coast.”

“Surprisingly enough, no,” she told her. “Every time I tried to tell someone it wasn’t fake they’d shoot me a look and offer me friendly little tidbits about how ‘less is more’. I swear to God, if I got that, ‘don’t try to sell it so hard, darling’ speech from one more suicide blonde whose roots were showing…” she said rolling her eyes. “So, yeah, platinum blonde doesn’t fly well in Corporate America so I dirtied it up a little and then I dirtied it a little more.”

“Hey, do you think I could pull off blonde?” She asked with an amused smirk. “Maybe we should switch looks since you’re punching bitches out and feeling your inner redhead and I know I could definitely use more fun.”

“That’s a thought,” Felicity told her. “Eh, who knows? Maybe I will. Seriously though, if you’re thinking about trading in Rita Hayworth for Marilyn Monroe, he did it with this avocado oil based dye in shades of ‘Honeyed Happiness’ and ‘Golden Glory’ then put me on this shampoo called Bumble and Bumble to tame the frizzies and maintain the color. You should check it out.”

“Looks nice!” Her eyes glinted merrily as she stuck a naughty tongue between her teeth. “So what else have you been ‘dirtying up’ since joining the ranks of the Corporate Clones? That Ollie Queen is H-A-W-T!”

“And moving on!” She flushed, refusing to answer her. “You know, Barbara, not that I don’t love hearing from you, but why the coded message on my landline? You could have just called me on my cell if you wanted to talk.”

“Yeah, about that…” She cleared her throat and bit her bottom lip nervously, “It’s about Watchtower.”

“Is there a glitch in the system?” Felicity frowned.

“Noooo,” she said, drawing it out. “Everything’s working just fine on our end.”

Felicity breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh good!”

“A little too well in fact.”
“Pardon?”

“While Bruce was out on patrol the other night a friend of yours pinged our system.”

“What?” Felicity asked, her heart suddenly skipping a beat.

“Calls herself The Huntress. And, as if it needs to be said, Bruce was not amused.”

“Is he ever?” Felicity tried to joke but it came out as a trembling stutter instead. This was bad—the so very not good kind of bad.

“Compared to his usual grim and stoic demeanor, he was especially unamused…particularly when your name came up.”

She shut her eyes and hung her head in defeat. “Fuck.” It figures that Helena would be either stupid or crazy enough to not only wander into the Bat’s territory but throw her name into the mix as well. She just hoped Oliver hadn’t been exposed. Next time Helena came for a visit she swore she’d arrow that crazy bitch personally. “Fuckity-fuck-fuckadoodledoo.”

“And that’s not even the best part: Guess who’s coming to town to pay you a little visit?”

Felicity swallowed, “Oh no.”

“Oh yes,” Barbara confirmed. “Just before he let Psycho-Bitch go she let him in on the fact that you’re working for another vigilante in Starling City and he got all Cave-Man about it. You know how he hates to share.”

“Wait? He let her go?!?” Felicity nearly shouted, outraged, choosing to put aside Bruce’s travel plans for the moment. “She insane! And a murderer! She’s practically the Joker with tits and a girl-on for mobsters! He should have taken her down or shipped to Arkham or something!”

“Well, Bruce isn’t exactly a fan of the Mob and since she knew who you were he let her go with a beat down, a separated shoulder, and a severe warning to leave his city and keep away from you or she’d have more than just some Robin Hood wannabe chasing after her. He even did the whole grumpy Bat-face growly thing. Afterwards he ordered Alfred to load up the jet so he could come give you a talking to but the good Mr. Pennyworth managed to talk him down.”

Felicity hung her head and shut her eyes as a bit of panic began to set in. “He’s coming down here with Dad on Friday, isn’t he?”

“Yup. And I have orders not to say anything to you so this is me not saying anything.”

“Great. If he’s coming here then who is watching Gotham?”

“He tapped Red Robin to step up for the time being.”

“Tim?” She said, thinking of her sister’s more on than off boyfriend. “I thought he and Bruce were currently on the outs.”

“Yeah, so that alone should tell you how pissed he is. In fact, the only good news is that he hasn’t said anything to your dad.”

She snorted, “Obviously! Dad might pretend not to suspect Bruce of being the Bat but he definitely wouldn’t be as happy to pretend not to notice anything if he thought I was ever a part of his whole crusade.”
“Technically your dad was the one to introduce the two of you and suggest Bruce use you as a consultant when we were developing Watchtower. I mean, he had to know that was Bat related.”

“I think Dad expected me to actually ‘consult’, not spend my days in the Batcave installing hardware and upgrading the systems while he was at the office.”

“Well, at the time the Batcave wasn’t exactly handicap accessible so I couldn’t do it, Dick can barely microwave popcorn, Tim’s almost as good as we are but he’d probably turn Watchtower into a video game arcade if I let him anywhere near it—seriously, can you imagine Bruce sitting down at his workstation and having Angry Birds or Star Wars; Revenge of the Sith pop up? I think we’ve had enough funerals in the Bat Family, thank you very much. Jason and Stephanie were already long gone—not that they would have been of any help anyway, so was Cassie but even if she weren’t she could barely speak, Damian was a worthless little psychopathic shit—not to speak ill of the dead—and Alfred is handy with research and sutures but he’s no Felicity Smoak-Fox when it comes to computers. Bruce could have done it but between the boardroom and the Bat when would he have the time?”

“I don’t think my Dad likes to think about the logistics of Bruce being the Batman too much. Remember he’s going for that whole ‘plausible deniability’ thing. He’s never even spoken about it to me except to say that if I ever need help with any ‘special projects’ business to let him know.”

“Yeah well, that’s the good news. Here’s the bad news: The reason he’s coming down is that the Huntress dropped in his lap the fact that someone put out feelers on you a while back and they were looking for an out of town contractor to get it done.”

Felicity stopped short and licked her lips. Her mind quickly scanned through any possible names who might want her dead and, to her surprise; there were a lot of them. “Who’s the client?”

“Don’t know; kind of a moot point though since the contract was rescinded around eighteen months ago. Since you’re still alive I’m guessing whoever had the wild hair up their ass got over it. Bruce, however, doesn’t see the silver lining in that and when he gets there he’s not just planning on spanking your cute little tushie—although I suspect you both might get a kick out of that—“

“Not funny.”

“It’s a little funny,” Barbara disagreed, “Point is, he’s also gunning for your boss.”

“Oliver or the Arrow?”

“I’m sorry, is there a difference?”

“Shit.” Felicity cursed under her breath. She briefly considered trying to convince Barbara that Oliver wasn’t the Arrow but the tone of the other woman’s voice and the look on her face told her she wouldn’t buy it. “How?”

“Lots of stuff, the clues are there when you know what to look for not to mention the fact that you appear to have a type: Billionaire Playboy by day, Masked Vigilante by night. You have heard of eHarmony, right? Match.com? They even have internet dating for farmers these days if you want to go all Green Acres.” Barbara said with a wry tone. “C’mon, Baby, do I have to give you the speech about not falling into destructive relationship patterns by channeling Dr. Phil or are you going to move to Metropolis next and try on something a little less brooding and a little more into primary colors?” Barbara paused, “You know, that guy flies. I wonder if anything of his catches on fire? Mmm, I’d risk some rug burns for that.”
She chose to ignore the other woman’s sarcasm and go for optimism instead. “But he just suspects, right? He doesn’t have anything concrete.”

“Yeah, that’s the spirit! Keep the faith, sunshine. Good things happen all the time like kittens popping out of rainbows being farted out of a unicorn’s butt because everyone knows that the Batman is a calm and reasonable kind of guy.” Felicity groaned and cupped her head in her hands but Barbara continued. “The fact that your Hottie in Green is connected to Ra’s al Ghul doesn’t help much either.”

“Wait, what?!” Felicity’s head shot up in alarm. “Oliver has nothing to do with Ra’s al Ghul!” Not quite a lie. Ra’s name had come up as they had begun to investigate the League of Assassins, plus there had been that uneasy alliance with Nyssa during the Army of Blood thing almost a year and a half ago, but Felicity wasn’t planning on mentioning that unless she was cornered. As for her own team, she had heard of Ra’s long before meeting Oliver but had held off sharing what she knew with them simply because she didn’t know enough to add anything of value. Bruce had been very secretive about his past association with the leader of the League of Assassins and had no idea she even knew as much as she did. Besides, all it would have led to is more questions, questions Felicity couldn’t answer.

Once again she wondered if keeping her past affiliation with Batman a secret had been a mistake on her part but she quickly dismissed the thought. It was too late now and the last thing she needed to do was tell Barbara that there was, in fact, some connection between the Arrow’s mission and Ra’s al Ghul when Oliver himself was still working all that out. Barbara wouldn’t dare withhold that kind of information from Bruce and few things got under the man’s skin worse than that particular name.

As if reading her thoughts Barbara said, “Maybe, maybe not, but that island he was on was a training ground for the League of Assassins and you know how he gets with anything Ra’s related. If he was a little ticked when he found out about the Arrow recruiting you, then you should have seen him when he asked me to look into this Lian Yu place: Not. Happy.”

“Yeah, I can imagine,” Felicity muttered. “When did all this happen?” She asked wearily. “What’s my timeline?”

“The Huntress was last night and the Lian Yu thing was early this morning. I waited until Bruce went down for his BatNap just in case he decided to be really paranoid and monitor even the secure channels. I’m giving you as much time as I can, Baby.” Barbara sighed and sat back from the monitor. “Look, how well do you know this Oliver guy?”

“He doesn’t know Ra’s, Barb. I’d know it if he was League and I would have called you guys first thing if he was. I’m not saying there isn’t a Ra’s connection here in Starling, we’ve been tracking it ourselves, but Oliver isn’t it. Before he met me this was a two man operation in an abandoned warehouse and they were getting by with a desktop his bodyguard picked up for him at Walmart. Barb, swear to God, they were still using McAfee because they thought it meant they were ‘secure’,” she said quietly but with confidence. Something occurred to her, “Did the client put feelers out to the League about me? Is that what has Bruce in a tizzy?”

“Baby-Girl, if the League had been given the contract you would already be dead by now and if the client pulled it before it was done, they’d be dead. The League has a strict ‘no take-sies, back-sies’ rule about that kind of thing,” Barbara said bluntly. “Whoever put out the hit contacted a high-end broker, the kind of guy who doesn’t advertise so you have to be in the know just to find him, and one who is strictly into hiring non-League assassins so either that was happy coincidence or they’re trying to sneak in under the League’s radar. That’s one of many things bothering Bruce about this. If Queen was League and they wanted to cripple his operation by getting to you, then they’d have a
reason to look for an independent operator. It could be a coincidence but you know how Bruce feels about those. He thinks Queen recruited you for a reason, babe. Bruce still files you under ‘Family’ so it’s not completely outside the realm of possibility.”

“First off, he didn’t recruit me; not really. He got lucky, that’s all. He was so hopelessly out of his league with this thing he was going to his own company’s IT department with bullet ridden laptops looking for help. The fact that I happened to be the one he spoke to is a goddamn miracle, anyone else would have dropped a dime. I still haven’t completely figured that one out yet. All I know is that he asked Walter Steele who he could trust in IT and he sent him to me. He doesn’t even know that Lucius is my dad much less my connection to Gotham City and the Bat and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Wait, you’ve been with this guy for all this time and he still doesn’t know anything about you?” Barbara huffed, “And I thought I had a shitty love life.”

“It’s not like that,” Felicity denied.

“You’re blushing.”

“So? I blush at a drop of the hat. I blush when Pepe LePew tries to seduce the pussycat on Cartoon Network!” She said going from light pink to blood red.

“Okay, you might not be playing ‘Hide the Arrow’ with your honey in green but you like him,” Barbara teased knowingly. “Just be careful with Bruce, girl. He’s always been unpredictable when it comes to you. Remember, I was there when you went from ‘Baby’, the tow-headed little tyke who stopped by the manor every once in a while with her daddy, to ‘Felicity’, the stacked 18 year old blonde bombshell with the doctorate and the tits that defied gravity.”

“Says the woman with the ‘D’ cups,” she said ruefully then looked down at her much more modest chest. “My alphabet ends two whole letters before yours.”

“Don’t sell your bee stings short,” she told her. “They fit your frame better than mine do and you have no idea how hard it is finding a decent bra some days. Believe me, underwire is both a blessing and a curse and sports bras can only do so much. Dick liked them, naturally, but you try running around in a mask with knockers that big. One night my elastic gave up the ghost while I was swinging from rooftop to rooftop and I nearly gave myself two black eyes. Besides, those puppies were good enough to have the Grim Guy in the Cowl take a second look so enjoy them; he certainly did.”

“Hilarious,” she said flatly.

“It’s the truth,” she shrugged. “I may not know what went down between you two right before you took off to Starling City but I had to live with the aftermath. Those first six months you were gone there was practically zero crime in Gotham. He was so bad even Alfred was about to strangle him.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t that bad,” Felicity said, suddenly unwilling to look directly into the camera. “Bruce doesn’t—didn’t—have those kinds of feelings for me.”

“You’ve been gone, what? A little over four years?”

“Yeah, so?”

Barbara sighed and leaned toward the monitor. “There are only two names that no one is allowed to utter in his presence because if anyone mentions either of them he goes dark for days: Selina Kyle and Felicity Smoak.”
“She’s still missing?” Felicity asked quietly. “I thought he would have found her by now.”

“He stopped looking a while back,” she said sadly. “I think that when you left he realized that… well…” She shook her head. “When Selina left he convinced himself that something had to have happened to her. He couldn’t accept that she had just had enough of his obsession with the mission. He kept trying to change her, tame her down, but he wouldn’t change for her in return. You know how it is with him; he has to control everything and everyone in his little universe and you just can’t domesticate a woman like Selena. Then you came along and threw him for a loop and he didn’t know which way was up anymore. He was so damn confused by you it would have been hilarious if the man wasn’t such a goddamn misery to be around. Then, one day, everything just changed. You left and he went to a darker place then any of us had ever seen up to that point. I offered to talk to you for him after a particularly bad night and he almost took my head off, said to never mention you again in the Cave or anywhere else for that matter.” She shot her a sad look, “I think you made him finally realize just how destructive this thing he carries inside of him is to the rest of us. We had hoped he’d have some kind of epiphany and wake up but he went the opposite direction. After Damian died it got even worse. He even tried pushing me, Dick, and Tim out for a while. I think that’s part of what drove Dick to another team after Bruce got back from his mental health moment; that and the fact that Bruce took back the cowl. He kind of got used to being the Bat and going back to Nightwing felt like getting sent back down to the Minors for him.”

“I don’t know why Dick always had such a complex about that stuff,” Felicity said sympathetically. “I know you and he have some recent rough history but he’s a good man and he’s brilliant. I just wish he would get over it.”

“Baby, you are preaching to the choir!” Barbara sighed, “You can’t even blame it all on Bruce either. It’s that whole Bat Curse thing they all have. Dick’s own worst enemy is Dick, but enough on that. I could spend all day on that man. Tim’s the only one who ever escaped the Bat-Angst but only by the skin of his teeth. He was always Bruce’s special kid, you know; the first one who wasn’t a complete wreck before he got to him, the only one who still has an intact heart. Damian was hard for Tim to deal with from the minute he showed up on Bruce’s doorstep. And that’s really saying something; you know Tim, he loves everybody.”

“Yeah,” Felicity said with a half-smile, “He’s a sweetie! I just hope he and my sister figure it out once and for all before it’s too late.”

“Are they back on or off?” Barbara asked.

“I can’t keep up,” Felicity snorted. “They never really ‘break-up’ per se, they just kind of wander away from each other then hook back up several months later. The word ‘commitment’ gives them both the heebie-jeebies.”

“That’s a total Bat thing, trust me. Every damn one of them would rather walk naked in a room full of barbed wire than actually commit,” Barbara snorted then grumbled, “I miss having Tim around the Cave. He was my special little buddy but he had no choice really but to take off. Like I was saying about the Anti-Christ and Timmy, that little psycho-creep had him so damned frosty from trying to kill him every five seconds he had to leave. Hell, Alfred nearly joined him! When Alfred can’t stand someone you know it’s bad. I thought for sure he was just going to lose it one day and pour rat poison on top of the little shit’s Froot Loops. Bruce was no help at all. He was practically catatonic from the shock of just having to deal with him and Tim couldn’t even sleep in the same house as the little fucker. After Bruce made him promise to stop trying to kill Tim, Damian broke into his room when he was sleeping and put a knife on the pillow next to his head because, and I quote, he was ‘trying to make a funny’. He could have taken him down but it was Bruce’s kid and he didn’t want to cause him any more pain than he had to. Instead he wound up spending more nights on my couch.
than I can count.”

She shook her head again, her countenance grim, “I could have kicked Bruce’s ass for that and Dick wasn’t much better. They were both so concerned with reining in Damian that Tim got completely left out in the cold. He seemed to handle it but I could tell he was upset. One night on the couch became two and before I knew it I had a roommate. I didn’t mind though. I mean, it’s Tim; talk about someone who’s easy to have around. It became pretty obvious he wasn’t going anywhere so I broke down and decided to build a second bedroom in the clock tower; Lord knows I have the room for it. Hell, other than my bedroom and the bathroom I don’t have any walls in this place, it’s all wide open. I was going to ask Timmy to throw up some dry wall and go to the furniture store with me so I could reclaim my couch but before I could break out the hammer and nails all the stress and lack of sleep finally got to him and he beat the shit out of the little fucker one day right out of the blue. I mean, the kid had it coming and I said as much to Bruce but for Tim it was the final straw. I know for a fact that’s what made Tim finally say enough is enough. Then when Damian died, and Bruce just lost his nut, Tim was just so angry and torn up about the whole thing. On one hand it was Bruce’s biological son but the kid was a monster, literally a monster. Bruce losing it over the kid that tried to kill him and nearly got him killed more times than he could count just felt like the worst kind of betrayal. Add to that Bruce’s whole habit of isolating himself when he’s in wounded animal mode…” She sighed, “Dick and Tim just couldn’t keep doing the push me, pull me dance with Bruce. Tim always felt like Bruce didn’t trust or love him enough and Dick always felt like he was coming up short.”

“Ironic then that he keeps going for tall redheads,” Felicity joked weakly and got an amused snort for her efforts. Oh man, she missed Barbara. Unlike most people Barbara Gordon truly admired her foot-in-mouth disease.

She smiled at her through the screen of her tablet, “I’m not trying to bring down the mood but it’s been lonely on this end for a while now, Baby. Especially for Bruce. He’s pushed everyone out but me and Alfred. He’s been getting better but a part of him has been dead inside for a while now. It’s like Bruce has been in a fog and then--Look, all I know is that the second he heard your name…Felcity, I can’t describe it. He’s an intense guy, he gets focused and everything falls to the wayside, but when he heard that Huntress chick say she held a crossbow to your throat…”

“Crap on a cracker,” Felicity said with a wince. “She had to go and mention that, huh?”

“Yeah, I don’t think you’re on her Christmas card list anymore. He didn’t react well to that information—at all.”

“It’s not like we were ever Facebook friends,” Felicity shrugged. “Gotta say, I really don’t feel all that bad about him kicking her leather clad ass either.”

“Point is it woke him up and not in a good way. He’s not too happy with the Arrow for even putting you in her orbit. Dick and I were a hell of a lot younger and dumber than you when we joined up and he had us literally juggling knives within a week, but he always acted like you were made out of spun glass. He’d bark orders and curse at us until he was blue in the face and then you’d walk in and he’d go from Bat to Bashful so fast it gave the rest of us whiplash. Even his voice changed around you.”

“I remember,” Felicity said quietly. Her dad had always called her ‘Baby’, never ‘Felicity’, and most close friends and family had gotten into the habit as well. With her dad and her siblings from his first marriage it was never, ‘Look what Felicity did’ it was ‘Look what Baby did’. Even Dick and Barbara (and to a lesser extent her sister’s occasional boyfriend Tim Drake-Wayne) would teasingly call her ‘Baby’ in an annoying way, but not Bruce. When Bruce said ‘Baby’, it didn’t sound like an
affectionate nickname, it sounded…she shivered and hoped Barbara didn’t notice.

“You exposed a side to Bruce none of us even knew existed so when the Huntress practically threatened to go back and finish the job she’d started by holding a crossbow to your throat, he totally lost it. I wasn’t kidding about the shoulder. He nearly wrenched it from the socket and that was before he ever heard your name. After that he really got mad.”

“That bad, huh? Yeah, she was probably pissed because I slipped her some dummy hardware. It was the second time she’d done the crossbow thing and I wasn’t in the mood to be generous,” Felicity said, trying not to read too much into what Barbara was saying about Bruce’s feelings towards her. After all, as much as she cared for the older woman, not even she had been told everything that had happened between them. Her sister had been the only one who knew the details of their one brief failed liaison. Bruce was just being territorial as far as she was concerned, that’s all.

“Eh, fuck her if she can’t take a joke,” she said dismissively. “But back to Bruce; I mentioned the jet thing, right?” Barbara reminded her with a wry grin. “Look Baby, he’s gunning for the Arrow and he might be telling himself that it’s about the Huntress, or Ra’s, or the fact that your guy gets a bit lethal with his arrows from time to time, but it’s ultimately about you. Just you. My advice, since you two aren’t ‘involved’, is to take a mini-break and let the masks sort it out among themselves without you in the picture to confuse matters. Don’t get in the middle of it. You can come down here and stay with me and maybe visit with your dad when he gets back. Maybe if Bruce sees you’ve left Starling City, it’ll calm him down and he’ll forget about him. In fact, he’ll probably just turn around and try to convince you to stay here permanently instead.” Barbara grinned, “The Batcave is due for some upgrades and I’m sure Alfred would love to see you…not to mention that we could all reap the benefits from you and Bruce finally doing something to resolve that sexual tension that was always sparking between you. I mean, if there’s anyone besides me that really needs to get laid…”

“Trust me, everything between Bruce and myself was resolved more than four years ago,” Felicity snorted.

Barbara’s jaw dropped and Felicity realized just what a tremendous faux pas she just made. “Holy shit! You two really did sleep together? And you didn’t tell me? You bitch!”

“No, no, no, no!” Felicity stammered. “I mean, yes—no—um—no comment!”

“Oh my GOD! You did!” She howled. “You little minx! I want details! Lots of details!”

“I’m not having this conversation!” Felicity shouted. “I’m logging off now!”

“No, no, no, no! I’ll stop, I promise!” Barbara said waving frantically at the monitor.

“You swear?” Felicity asked, face burning hot with embarrassment.

“I swear!” Barbara said as she crossed her heart with her fingers.

“Fine,” Felicity said cautiously. “Look, I need to know if you have my back here. I know your first duty is to Bruce, and I would never ask you to compromise that, but things aren’t…we’re doing good work here, Barb. It might not look that way from Gotham, and we might not be as sophisticated an operation as you guys, but we’re in the middle of some pretty intense stuff and having the Batman tear through town could tilt the delicate balance we have going. I promise you, we’re not just playing Robin Hood for kicks. There are real lives on the line here and Starling City is just as important to us as Gotham is to all of you.” She put all the sincerity she could muster in her next words, “If it comes down to it, if Bruce forces me to have to make a choice between staying here and compromising my team or leaving and never looking back, I’ll leave. I will cut ties and take
off to Europe or go be with Luke in Africa and try to contribute down there, but I won’t just let Bruce Wayne or Batman think he can snap his fingers and summon me back to Gotham. I also won’t just roll over or abandon my team without trying to mitigate the possible exposure of their identities as much as possible. I can’t reveal the Arrow to Bruce any more than I could unmask Batman to my team. Bruce suspecting that Oliver Queen is the Arrow and him knowing are still two very different things. If I have to use a bit of obfuscation to protect them, all I ask is that you pick up what I’m putting down and try not to unravel anything too quickly for Bruce. Buy me a little time, that’s all I’m asking.”

Barbara took a minute to consider her words, “I won’t lie to Bruce but, if you should happen to lay a few traps, I’ll do my best to fall into them, okay?”

“Thank you,” she said, exhaling a shaky breath.

“You and Bruce, always with your protocols and mazes within mazes—you already had a contingency plan for this set up, didn’t you?” Her green eyes sparkled Merrily, the mood suddenly picking back up.

“Well…” Felicity muttered, her lips ticking upward. “I had a few protocols in place in case we were exposed. I thought it was going to be a cop turning us in but it works for Bruce just as well.”

“Just you protect yourself, too, understood? Just because the hit got cancelled doesn’t mean the danger has passed.”

Danger was something she was all too familiar with these days. “If someone wanted me dead, I’d be dead, but…I’ll do my best.”

“Great, now that that’s all settled, I just have one question.”

“Shoot.”

“It’s about the tumbler, you know, the Batmobile!”

“The tumbler?” She asked in confusion, “What about it?”

“Well, I was just wondering,” Barbara’s lips curled upwards in a saucy grin, “in regards to what you know about Bruce and the Batmobile’s specs, is it true what they say about men using their cars to compensate for the size of their—?”

“Goodbye Barbara!” Felicity said just as she ended the transmission. She sat back into the couch cushions with an “Oof!” and eyed the now cold containers of Chinese takeout with a grimace.

“Damn, I think I just lost my appetite.”
Chapter Four

bruce

first

kiss
Chapter Four

Bruce leaned back in his seat aboard his private jet and glanced through the details of the Queen Consolidated proposal with a disinterested eye. Even though he had turned over the majority of the day-to-day operations to Lucius Fox he still kept abreast of everything that went on at Wayne Enterprises. He was a self-admitted control freak and that need for that level of control extended not only to his job as Batman. Still, the only thing he had on his mind was Oliver Queen and his mission and just how involved Felicity was in it.

And was she just involved in his mission or was it something else? Something more?

He looked at the picture of Oliver Queen on the tablet before him: tall, dark blond hair, rakish good looks, well-bred, well spoken, a ladies man (pre-island at least). Older than Felicity but still younger than he was by several years, he could see how she might find him attractive. She wouldn’t have touched the Oliver Queen before he was lost at sea with a ten foot pole, but the Arrow…

Felicity was good at fixing broken things and, in Bruce’s experience, it took a broken man to do what he and this Arrow did every night while guarding their individual city’s streets.

He wasn’t a pretty boy either. Used to be, not anymore. The island had aged him, scarred him, took away some of the fat he had developed as a privileged member of the 1%. Those muscles weren’t from half-assing it in some trendy gym, no. Bruce could recognize the shape and stance of a fellow warrior from a mile away. No matter how many alibis this Queen came up with there was no doubt in his mind that Oliver Queen was the Arrow.

Alfred had, as always, been meticulous in building his dossier on Queen, especially in regards to his personal life. He was both a partier and a player before the island and it appeared that he wasn’t overly careful with his women back then either. According what Barbara managed to uncover by hacking into his medical records and his attorney’s computer, he had apparently fathered a child when he was eighteen. His name wasn’t on the birth certificate but there was a confidentiality agreement on file along with other legal documentation signed by the boy’s mother where she absolved Queen of any and all financial responsibility for the child in exchange for a lump sum child support payment of two million dollars. Last year he amended the agreement and set up a trust as well as made provisions in his will including a life insurance policy, but he’d made no effort to get visitation rights or to officially establish paternity through a DNA test. In fact, he’d signed his
Barbara searched but, near as she could figure, they’d been taken into Federal Witness Protection following the boy’s abduction by Malcolm Merlyn and subsequent rescue. WITSEC wasn’t handling it though; it had all the earmarks of an ARGUS operation. The records weren’t just wiped; it was like they had never existed to begin with. ARGUS being involved at all with it was a big red flag as far as he was concerned.

Another thing that bothered him about that whole situation was that after Merlyn was taken out, Queen allowed them to remain in hiding. While he never thought of himself as a particularly good father, Bruce did believe in taking his responsibilities seriously. While Queen appeared to be taking financial responsibility the fact that he would sign away his parental rights and cut off all contact to his own child so completely bothered him. Plus, he knew Felicity well enough to know that she would never be with a man who could abandon his child; the fact that she knew this about Queen and still stayed was disturbing on many levels.

It appeared that, while the younger version of Queen was reckless, the newer version was much more cautious. He’d settled down considerably since taking the on the mantle of CEO and when it came to relationships, Queen had a type: tall, beautiful, ambitious, articulate, a bit cool, a bit damaged, and intelligent. From what Bruce could tell, he wanted to find a woman who could play a brunette version of Moira Queen; in other words, someone who was the complete opposite of Felicity. Oh, she was beautiful and intelligent, but with her hair the color of winter sunshine, warm nature, and sweet stumbling speech, she was definitely not his type either before or after the island. She didn’t fit his pattern and, despite being the adopted daughter of Lucius Fox, she had not been raised in the spotlight of high society. Lucius was an intensely private man, a thing Bruce very much respected about his friend, and had kept her as sheltered and safe as he could. Felicity was many things but she was not the type of woman who would easily tolerate the life and constraints of a society matriarch.

Bruce had met Moira Queen once. She was warm and welcoming in as much as a woman born into the world of the extremely wealthy could ever be. Oh, she loved her children, worked tirelessly for charities, and was an excellent hostess, but her eyes always seemed to lack that spark of human kindness, her laugh just a little too measured and cool, and never a hair out of place. She was the type of mother who enjoyed spending time with her children after the nannies had cleaned them up and who had no idea what their favorite foods were or who their friends were because she had a staff to deal with that sort of thing. She spoiled her children, yes; but she did not raise them. Moira Queen was the epitome of the cultured elite, or had been before her death two years previously.

She and her daughter had been targeted by a mercenary named Slade Wilson who was hired by the man running against her for mayor. After allegedly murdering Moira Queen and his supposed employer, Sebastian Blood, he completely disappeared.

As intriguing as the circumstances surrounding her death were, it was also irrelevant to the matter at hand. Moira was dead and either Slade or the Arrow killed Sebastian Blood, aka Brother Blood, and defeated his supposed ‘Blood Army’ shortly afterwards. This Slade Wilson was presumed dead or on the run after the Arrow and his team consisting of known members of the League of Assassins and Amanda Waller’s Suicide Squad dropped a city block on top of their heads then trapped the rest in a tunnel and shot them full of tranquilizers before hauling them off to ARGUS’s own Super Max.

Bruce looked at the date in the file. He, Tim, and Dick had been dealing with the aftermath of Damian’s death around that time and none of them found out about the attack on Starling until it was over. It wasn’t until they were heading home on the jet from confronting Ra’s and Talia that Tim got
the messages sent to him by a frantic Tam. The grid was down; landlines, cellular networks, even the internet was blacked out. No one could get any word on what was happening in Starling City. Initial reports said it was another massive earthquake but, unlike the one that was caused by the Markov device, this one was affecting the city as a whole and not just the Glades. He’d been a wreck but the minute he heard Tim’s frantic call to Tam and Dick instructing the flight attendant to have the pilot head straight for Starling he’d snapped out of it. They were halfway there when Tam was able to confirm that Felicity was safely out of the city and at a tech conference in Las Vegas the entire week.

Now…he sighed, now he didn’t know what to think. He’d been so ragged after that…

He’d had a bit of a breakdown for a while and took off for several months to get his head together. Knowing what he now knew, he was fairly certain she’d been lying about being at a tech conference. Now he wonders if, not only did he fail Felicity by not continuing on to Starling that day, but if she hated him so much that she was willing to die rather than reach out for his help.

He pushed that out of his mind and concentrated on the dossier in front of him. While the Detective in him found the circumstances of Moira Queen’s murder interesting, what he was now concerned with was her son. Specifically the choices he made when it came to the women in his life: Laurel Lance, Helena Bertinelli, and, if rumors were true, Isabel Rochev.

Laurel Lance was a former girlfriend with whom he still maintained a somewhat amicable relationship. As a former-ADA with a father on the force, Quentin Lance, it made sense that he’d keep it friendly; that was a nice contact to have in your back pocket if you spent part of your life as a murdering vigilante. She left the Starling City DA’s office a few months ago to enter a treatment facility for bipolar depression and substance abuse and was now in Central City living with her mother and doing volunteer work with Legal Aid.

Helena Bertinelli was the daughter of a crime boss and just as flexible a sense of morality. She currently billed herself as a vigilante but Bruce knew what she was the moment he set eyes on her; a killer. She had been swallowed by the dark and, sooner or later, she would have to be dealt with. If she hadn’t dropped Felicity’s name on the roof he would have tossed her in Arkham until she forgot what the sun even looked like. Felicity was his priority at the moment but, as soon as he had her back home where she belonged, taking down the Huntress was on the top of his to-do list.

As for Isabel Rochev—well; she was a piece of work. Even Alfred couldn’t find much but what he did find was more than enough to earn her a spot on the Batman’s watch list.

Just as he was fairly certain that a man like Queen had no real emotional attachment to Felicity he knew she probably had plenty of feelings for him. It was in her nature to care about someone so obviously wounded. Either way he saw his proximity to her as a disaster in the making. Any way you cut it, this man was going to get her hurt. At worst he was a bored rich boy with mental issues and a history of poor judgment, at best he was a well-intentioned amateur that was destined to either get caught or killed and he was going to take everyone in his orbit down with him. No, Queen was not going to be using Felicity any more, not if he had anything to say about it.

Alfred had also included a file on her showing that in the four years since she’d left Gotham, she went from her position as a senior IT manager at QC to Oliver Queen’s EA overnight and when she wasn’t at his corporate headquarters she was at some nightclub he owned in the slums called Verdant where she was on the books as his IT Consultant.

Bruce snorted to himself. “Subtle.”

Hell, maybe he’d open his own club in the East End called, ‘The Dark Night’.
He closed the file and settled back into the plush leather cushions of his seat. ‘Why in the hell would she get caught up in something like this?’ He thought to himself. ‘Why would she deliberately align herself with some killer posing as a hero?’

He thought back to what Barbara had told him, how she had warned him that his presence in this matter would not be appreciated. She was right, he knew that. Felicity would not be welcoming him with open arms, and he didn’t blame her. Not after what had happened between them. Still, she was his responsibility whether she acknowledged it or not. He’s the one who drew her into this world, who exposed her to the mission. She should have never been touched by the darkness that consumed him. It was his fault she was in danger, his fault that she was now at risk, and even if this was a life she had chosen for herself, if he hadn’t hurt her the way he had, she never would have fled to Starling City to begin with.

He allowed his mind to go back four years previously when everything had changed for them.

Alfred was in England visiting his sister who was having surgery and Dick had already been spending more and more time in Bludhaven, slowly cutting his ties with the team. Tim had taken his spot as Red Robin but Damian coming into the picture had strained their relationship. He had taken an away assignment to get some space and Bruce had let him go. The arrival of a biological child he’d never known about was bad enough but the fact that his son was basically a child version of the Joker had left him feeling hollow inside. His entire team was in chaos and rather than deal with it, it was just easier to let them go their own way.

Damian and Felicity had only met one time and what had happened afterwards had chilled him to the bone. It was the only time he’d ever truly lost his temper with the boy.

Felicity had come over to work on the Watchtower system and was under the console chattering merrily away when he walked in. He watched from the shadows as she and Damian interacted. The boy was perched birdlike on the desk, his eyes following her every move as she talked to him about what she was doing, programming and AI theory; about everything and anything under the sun. From a distance it was a pleasant little scene but something about the way he was watching her chilled him. He listened as Damian, in an almost sweet voice, asked Felicity if she would like some cocoa. Damian never did anything that he considered ‘servant’s work’ so it instantly put him on alert. Just as Felicity was about to reach for the cup, he stepped out of the shadows and called her over. He led her away and asked a few pointless questions about how the systems were coming along, he couldn’t even remember half the conversation now. When he was done he told her to go home and watched as she headed up to the manor before turning to the boy.

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The boy was almost pouting; a look of dissatisfaction had pulled his lips down in a frown. Bruce picked up the cup he had offered Felicity and sniffed it then handed it to his son.

“Drink,” he told him.

“It’s cold now,” Damian said flatly.

“Drink,” Bruce commanded.

“I don’t want it,” he told him.

“What did you put in the cup, Damian?”

Damian looked at the cup then back up to Bruce, “Nothing.”

Bruce gripped the cup in his fist and flung it at the wall. The child said nothing, just continued to
stare at him with those dark cruel eyes so like his mother’s.

“Stay away from Felicity,” he told him in a growl. “You will not hurt her, do you understand?”

“Why does she matter?” Damian said dismissively then sneered. “Really Father, I was trying to do you a favor. You indulge these cattle you surround yourself with too much. She’s only a servant and she prattles too much. There she was, kneeling at my feet, thinking she could teach me—me! Frankly, she was acting far too above her station. Death by poison was really too good for--!”

Bruce gripped the front of his son’s shirt and snatched him up from his perch until he was looking him dead in the eye. “If anything happens to any of my people, if I find out you’ve tried to hurt anyone else on this team including Felicity and Alfred, there will be consequences.”

“You won’t kill me,” Damian said with a smirk despite the look of rage on his father’s face. “I’m your son.”

“Maybe not,” Bruce conceded, “but when I’m done you’ll wish I had.”

“Meaning?” He asked off-handedly but something in his eyes told Bruce that Damian was beginning to wonder if he hadn’t gone just a little too far this time.

He tightened his grip on his collar and shook him slightly, watching in grim satisfaction as the boy’s eyes grew wide and clenched his teeth together as he spoke in an almost feral snarl, “Meaning that if I feel you are completely beyond redemption I will see to it you spend the rest of your life heavily medicated and in a straightjacket, do I make myself clear?”

The smile was instantly wiped off his face and Damian responded sullenly, “Yes, Father.”

The next day Damian disappeared. He hadn’t even looked for him figuring he’d eventually turn up again but secretly praying he wouldn’t. When Damian returned after Felicity left…Bruce closed his eyes and tried to suppress the painful memories of his son again.

Meanwhile, Dick’s pulling away from the team had also affected his relationship with Barbara so they had gone out of town on a romantic getaway to try to figure things out. After much cajoling, Barbara had convinced him that Felicity could be trusted to run Watchtower from the cave alone. He hadn’t liked it, not one bit, especially not knowing when or if Damian would return, but his team had insisted.

The chaos that had entered his sanctuary had put him into overdrive and he’d been hitting the streets hard. They knew he’d go out alone if no one was there to monitor coms and, without someone monitoring the chatter, he’d be out there blind without any sort of back up. So, even though he vehemently expressed his discomfort at the plan, he went along with it.

Already an emotional basket case, living in such close proximity to Felicity had been a living hell for him. The littlest thing she did would send his thoughts in a tailspin. He tried hiding his reactions through gruff monosyllable speech and grim silence, but she had seen right through it. She spent the entire week living in the manor with him, cooking simple meals in the kitchen for them both, and running his coms by night. As the days and nights drew on he became more and more distracted by her: Felicity curled up in his study while he worked, not saying a word, just reading a book and bundled up in a fluffy afghan. Felicity laughing at him as he tried to figure out how to cook one of the meals Alfred had prepared and frozen for them before he’d left. Felicity’s sweet, soft chatter as she spoke to him through his ear piece as he leapt from one rooftop to another…

He closed his eyes for a moment as he allowed the pain to wash through him. He lost so much the
day she left, the day he pushed her out of his life. Her name literally meant ‘joy’ and, for just a brief moment of time, that emotion had begun to creep into his cold, cold heart and it was all her doing.

For years he’d just thought of her as ‘Baby’, the little girl who would color him pictures and who Lucius would brag about in board meetings whenever someone asked how she was doing in school, and then one day that started to change. She grew up when he wasn’t expecting it. It threw him off, made him uncomfortable, so much so he’d almost managed to convince himself that the oddly protective and territorial feelings he’s started to develop towards her didn’t arise from a physical attraction but because of his friendship with Lucius.

He’d stepped in to help before, after all, although never with the other man’s knowledge. Lucius had told him of the incident that led to Luke nearly tearing the arm off a frat boy who had been practically stalking Felicity her freshman year at MIT. The boy, Sebastian Hady III (grandson of Sebastian Hady, one of the most corrupt mayors in Gotham history who had been on his list for a while) had been arrested for harassment and stalking, somehow managed to have the charges dropped due to his family’s shady connections and decided to get payback by suing them for damages he’d suffered due to his injuries. After hearing what this young man had intended to do to Felicity, the Bat paid the rich young punk a visit to convince him that it would be in his best interest to drop the matter and to stay off his radar from then on. Despite the intimidating appearance of Gotham’s vigilante in his path, money and a lifetime of privilege had convinced the little bastard that he was invincible and he arrogantly remarked that he was just trying to do the ‘little slut’ a favor so he cured him of his misconceptions by breaking his other arm in two places. At the time he’d told himself he was just looking out for the daughter of one of the few men he trusted but, deep inside, he knew that wasn’t it. Not really. If that had been the case he wouldn’t have brought her in to begin with…not that he’d meant to.

Barbara had been struggling for a way to improve the Watchtower Protocol for a while when Felicity published her article in Scientific American which was based on her doctoral thesis. The minute she read it she called him, sent him a copy, and asked him to look it over. Felicity, who had worked in the MIT Computer Science and AI Lab had come up with a theoretical AI program based on mobile applications and decryption technology she called LAIR, which would later be the basis of the new Watchtower program she and Barbara would go on to develop. It was, quite frankly, an evolutionary leap in the field of computer programming. Reading it convinced him to approach Fox on seeing if his daughter might be available to consult on some theoretical research he was working on as a, quote, ‘special project’; a code phrase they had developed by unspoken agreement for anything related to the Batman’s mission. None of them realized just how perceptive young Felicity Fox would prove to be until she fixed him with a steely eye and asked him outright that if she were to agree to build his supercomputer could she get a ride in the Batman’s tumbler?

He should have walked away from her then but she’d had that spark, that fire in her eyes that he’d seen in all of his young charges when he first encountered them. It wasn’t the same burning rage that drove him, or the overwhelming urge to prove themselves that Dick and Tim had. It wasn’t even the sense of justice that fueled Barbara to first take up the mantle of Batgirl only to lose the use of her legs and continue the fight as Oracle from behind a computer screen. No, with Felicity Smoak it was much simpler. For her it was simply a matter of right and wrong; if someone was hurting, you fixed it. If it’s the city that’s suffering, then you do what you can to bring justice to the streets and make it right again.

Felicity’s character was shaped by a painful childhood. Lucius Fox was a brilliant engineer and successful businessman and her mother, Evie, had been a beautiful and talented artist and they had a happy, if brief, marriage until she died of leukemia just shy of Felicity’s fourth birthday. As open-minded and liberal as the Gotham elite pretended to be, Lucius Fox was still a black man in a white man’s world and he was married to a platinum blonde bohemian artist with an illegitimate child who
had ‘stolen’ a married man from his family.

Evie, and by extension Felicity, was most definitely given the cold shoulder at every opportunity. The same people who smiled in Lucius’s face and prided themselves on having the courage and liberal sensibilities it took to invite a black man to their dinner table saw Evelyn Fox as a conniving whore who attached herself to a married man just because he had money. It didn’t matter that she was a celebrated artist by then, all they saw was the Vegas cocktail waitress she’d been before her art career took off and that she wasn’t one of them. Felicity, even as a young child, had to endure the not so subtle whispers about Evie Smoak long after her death. She heard the words ‘bastard’ and ‘daughter of the whore’ from adults and her classmates and had taken it upon herself to shield her father from that pain. She isolated herself because of it, retreating into a quiet, almost non-existent presence within Gotham society but she never let him see how much she truly resented the mother she could barely remember and who he would love with an enduring passion for the rest of his life. She was his champion, even as a child, and she endured it unflinchingly.

The other things that shaped and defined her were her kindness, empathy, and willingness to forgive. If you asked Lucius where those qualities came from he’d say it was Evie’s final gift that taught both of them that lesson. Tanya, his first wife, had begged him to slow down, to spend time with her and their children. She’d even left him just to wake him up and get his attention and then he met another woman and completely changed. For years, he’d neglected his family but he was willing to shower a woman half his age and a child that wasn’t even his with all of the love and consideration he’d failed to show her. Understandably Tanya had been devastated and there had been a backlash against what Gotham society viewed as a rich man’s trophy marriage. After Evie passed and he’d finally understood what Tanya had gone through, their relationship greatly improved. Tanya, much to her credit, accepted his apology and never appeared to hold any hard feelings against the child of the woman her husband had fallen in love with. They became the best of friends and co-parents, even reconciling to a certain extent but never remarrying, and raised all of the children as full siblings. Felicity spent just as much time in his ex-wife’s care as his children did in his own. Tanya and Lucius were often praised by their contemporaries as having one of the most amicable relationships between exes they’d ever been witness to. Lucius often said it was the only good thing to come from his wife’s death.

Felicity may not have been his biological daughter but she had inherited that aura of integrity Lucius had around him. Bruce had felt it at that moment and he knew that she, just like her father, could be trusted with his secret. He and Lucius had never openly discussed his mission or Felicity’s involvement and he had never pressed the issue but he suspected that the older man knew she was doing a bit more than simply consulting. He’d hinted, only once. He’d said to him one day when they were alone in his office, apropos to nothing, “She’s all I have left of Evie, Bruce. Keep her safe.” And he did, he’d tried.

Unlike his other adopted ‘children’, Bruce had not tried to put her out in the streets. Even when she asked he refused to train her or to allow Dick to encourage her tentative inquiries into how he and Barbara had joined him in his mission. Felicity was only to be on the Watchtower Project, nothing more. She had access to the Batcave, knew all of their secrets and then some, but she was never to be in the line of fire. He’d even tried to see her as one of his charges, if not as a daughter then as a niece, but…

Bruce sighed as the memories he’d try to suppress came to the forefront. It shouldn’t have happened. It was a mistake, one he still regretted. He was almost twice her age, already in his mid-thirties, a grown man with a lifetime of experiences she couldn’t possibly understand. It didn’t matter that she’d graduated college and successfully defended her thesis in one of the most prestigious doctorate programs in the country; to him she should have been a child. He’d known her since she was practically a baby and his experiences had hardened him, aged him beyond his years, and she was 19
years old and sheltered to the point that she had never even been kissed.

Felicity had always gotten under his skin and brought out his most protective instincts. She was always with Lucius, always playing in his office, so he’d seen her grow up. Add to that the fact that she had been painfully shy as a child and awkward as a teenager, she slipped under his radar until it was too late. Somehow he’d missed the fact that she was just as haunting a beauty as her mother ever was until one day he looked at her and was struck dumb by it. That’s when he stopped thinking of her as Lucius’s daughter and as a woman. Between that, her intelligence, and her fresh-faced innocence, she would prove to be his utter undoing.

It wasn’t just him though; over the year or so that she spent working by their sides in between her graduate studies and other obligations, his entire family fell under her spell. Barbara had taken her in under her wing as they bonded over developing the communication and decryption software that helped run Watchtower. Dick, who’d always carried within himself a bit of an inferiority complex, found her to be a kindred soul. Here was someone even more socially awkward than himself, who felt just as displaced as he did growing up as a child of humble roots adopted into vast wealth, and who looked up to him with a bit of hero worship. Tim got along with everyone and their closeness in age combined with his infatuation with her sister made him even more welcoming toward her. Alfred was simply delighted to have one charge under his wing that could be spared the scars of Batman’s mantle while still helping to shoulder their burden. He saw her as a source of light chasing away the shadows that haunted the rest of them. He’d even tried to play matchmaker a few times, dropping hints about Bruce’s own parent’s May/December romance when he’d caught his gaze lingering a few times.

Damian had been the only exception. He, unlike the rest of them, had been completely immune to her gentle charisma. In fact, he had a murderous umbrage toward her that Bruce had yet to understand. It took him days to decide to eliminate Tim as a rival but he tried to kill Felicity within the first hour or so of their meeting. How he saw her as the greater threat when Bruce hadn’t even been in the room until the very end he still didn’t know. Perhaps it really was just that Felicity had tried to be kind to the boy. For whatever reason, it was visceral; an almost instinctual hatred toward her. Even after she left it had been there. He never mentioned her name or her absence until the day he taunted Tim about taking his place as the new Robin. In addition to making disparaging remarks about the other young man’s skills and sexuality, he brought up Felicity’s name in a less than flattering context. Tim, in response, had given him the beat down the boy so richly deserved.

He had frozen up and let it happen because there was nothing else he could do. The truth was, as the filth about Felicity poured from his mouth, he’d been so tempted to do what Tim had done he’d been horrified. He’d had to leave the room; he just couldn’t deal with it. The boy was a sociopath and a killer, but he was still a child and Bruce’s first instinct had been to...

He sighed, Tim left after that and he couldn’t blame him. He let him go thinking he’d be better off. Hell, in the end he wound up foisting Damian off on Dick because he was the only one who had the patience to deal with him. Had he continued to try to take over Damian’s training he was afraid that eventually he would lose control like Tim had and the consequences of that just wasn’t something he was prepared to deal with.

After that there had been an accident in which he had lost several months’ time with absolutely no memory of what had transpired. He had been hunting a man named Roman Sionis, aka The Black Mask, when he encountered a strange machine in the madman’s ‘collection’ known as ‘The Omega Device’. They were struggling when he fell against the device, damaging it, and then simply disappeared. Everyone presumed he’d been killed, vaporized; everyone except Tim, that is. As much as he had disappointed the boy, Tim was always his most devoted child, the only one he actually ever considered to be his son. It was Tim’s insistence that he was still alive that convinced Dick and
Alfred to hide his ‘demise’ from the general public. Instead he was reportedly ‘traveling’ and concentrating on his Foundation work for a while. Not even Lucius was told the truth. Tim took the reins at Wayne Enterprises with Dick stepping into the office when necessary. He found him months later with no recollection of what had happened to him other than a few confusing and disjointed memories and hallucinations that he had never been able to make sense of. He remembered being part of a primitive tribe, of going back to meet his ancestors, even of aliens and alien landscapes where he encountered people who were parallel versions of their true selves.

Tim wound up tracking him down after he’d been discovered unconscious and lying in a pile of garbage near Arkham with drugs in his system and no clue how he got there or who had been holding him. Whatever had happened, he appeared none the worse for wear after the drugs left his system other than a bit of dehydration, some cuts, a few new and unexplained scars, and some minor burns. He’d probably never know what had happened even though he’d tried to find out. He hadn’t been held for ransom and no one had any clue as to why anyone would take him then just release him again. Sionis himself could offer no clues as he’d been killed by another member of the Bat’s Rogue’s Gallery before Bruce had been recovered. The device itself had also disappeared.

According to his sources, it and all the other items in Sionis’s possession had been confiscated by ARGUS and destroyed. When he returned he tried to reconnect with Damian and, for a short time he thought he might have actually succeeded, but then he died.

All that time lost. Damian had been dead for almost two years and he still felt like a failure. He even failed Tim in the end. After all the hard work he’d done getting him back, after all the loyalty he’d shown, when Bruce shut down after Damian’s death he had taken it to heart and left. The loss of Tim’s respect had hit him almost as hard as Damian’s death had. Going after Felicity after all that would have been unfair to her. He’d thought about it, God knows it had crossed his mind several times over the last four years, but she couldn’t have fixed him. He’d driven everyone but Barbara away in his grief and had he done that to Felicity it would have been the final blow to his already fragile psyche.

His mind flew back to how he’d catch himself looking at her, watching her as she worked and of the feelings of guilt and disgust with his own lechery that would overwhelm him. He was technically old enough to be her father, for God’s sake! To combat his attraction to her he redoubled his efforts to find Selina, convincing himself that it was just loneliness on his part. He began to use his failed relationship with the former Catwoman as a shield, putting her forward whenever she seemed to get too close. He tried to warn her off with gruff speech and a sour disposition but she always seemed to see right through it. He’d finally settled on a strategy of just ignoring her but having her in the cave manning Watchtower made that impossible.

He’d gone out on patrol that night just to get away from her and purposefully stuck to the least active sections of the city to minimize his chances of having to interact with her when he ran into trouble. One of his targets had hired some kind of meta-human swordsman to take him out. The battle had been brief and he’d managed to survive the assault with just a deep cut to the arm (despite being protected by state of the art Kevlar armor) by forcing the other man off the rooftop where he dropped nearly 20 stories only to disappear by the time he’d gotten to when he thought the body had landed.

When he got to the Cave, Felicity was there. Normally Alfred handled his injuries or he’d suture them himself, but the cut was deep and at an awkward angle on his bicep so he’d agreed to let Felicity treat it for him.

He could never decide whether it was him coming off of the adrenaline rush or the loss of blood that caused his resistance to waver that night. The only thing he knew for sure was that it had been his fault, a fact that would haunt him for years. She’d been innocent in that as well.
Felicity, despite being at an age where most girls had some awareness of their sexuality, wouldn’t have even known how to seduce him. Even if she had, it wouldn’t have been over blood and bandages while dressed in a ratty sweater, t-shirt, and blue jeans, her fresh faced beauty unenhanced by cosmetics. He’d known she had a crush on him for some time; it had been fairly obvious. Whenever she’d talk to him she’d just shine, her smile taking on a brilliance that was nearly blinding in its intensity. So much so, that it even caused his dark heart to lighten when she would enter the room and, if he were honest, it scared the shit out of him.

“Oh crap! Your arm!” She cried out as she jumped up from the console to rush over to him with a towel in her hand. She slapped it over his wound and winced as he gave a low grunt of pain. “Sorry—sorry! Ow, that looks nasty. I’ll go get the first aid kit.”

“I can handle it,” Bruce growled at her as he whipped the cowl off of his face and made his way towards the medbay they had set up near the training area.

“Are you sure?” She asked uncertainly, “’Cause it’s kind of deep and you’d have to be pretty bendy to reach it. Not that you aren’t bendy,” she said quickly. “I mean, I’ve watched you work out and do all those flips and stuff. You’re bendy, just not as bendy as Dick. Not that Dick is better than you even though he’s younger.” She winced, still trailing behind him. “Crap, no. You’re not old! I didn’t mean to imply that you were old because you’re not old, just less bendy. I like how old you are. You aren’t old as much as you are well seasoned, like a really great kind of seasoned. Like a really well seasoned man-steak. Mouthwatering really…” She trailed off and bit her lip as he shot her a dark look. “I’ll just stand here quietly while you do that thing you do…all bendy and stuff.”

Bruce stripped off boots and socks followed by his armor until his torso and legs were bare before sitting on the cot in the medbay and began to clean the wound. What he really needed was a shower but the cut took priority over his desire to remove the sweat and dried blood from his flesh. Unashamed, he sat in nothing but his boxer briefs so he could assess all the damage he had taken on in the fight. He glanced up at Felicity who was now beet red with embarrassment at being so close to him in such an unclothed state and promptly dismissed her reaction. In fact, it was probably a good thing he’d made her uncomfortable, maybe now she’d leave him to his ministrations in peace. He looked at the bruises on his shins, thighs, and ran a hand over the sore spot on his jaw. The armor had done its job there at least. Some arnica and high doses of vitamin E would help with that but his torso and upper arm were a different matter entirely.

He grunted again in discomfort as he attempted to treat the laceration with his good arm. His side was a mass of bruises from the blows the swordsman had managed to land after he’d been disarmed. He’d been a strong son of a bitch and even though his armor had protected his ribs from being broken they were still badly bruised. They’d have to be wrapped before he could attempt to give himself stitches.

As if reading his mind, Felicity took off her sweater and rolled up the sleeves of her long sleeved tee, grabbing the elastic bandages from Alfred’s kit. “I could help wrap your ribs if you want? And I think Alfred has some of that glue he uses to hold together lacerations. Really, I think it needs proper stitches because the glue can leave a nasty scar but you’ve already got plenty of those so it’s not like it’ll make a difference, right? Not that you don’t look good.” She added quickly. Her eyes wandered over his bare chest and he watched as her eyes darkened slightly. “Really, really good.” She closed her eyes as soon as she realized what she had said and bit her bottom lip. “Oh man, that sounded creepy, didn’t it? Sorry. Just, I mean, you’re not horribly disfigured or anything! Scars can be attractive, lots of people like scars! In fact, there are indigenous tribes throughout Africa who use scarification rituals as a way to enhance—”

Despite himself, Bruce was a little impressed by the fact that she hadn’t backed down after her initial
embarrassment followed by rambling babble. He felt the corners of his lips twitch upwards in amusement. She really was adorable. “It’s fine, really. Go ahead and start wrapping my ribs and then you can help dress the wound on my arm.”

Her face lit up and she clutched the roll of bandages to her chest like he’d just handed her a prize. “Really?”

“Just do it,” he sighed, his lips twitching upwards despite himself, and held out his arms so she could start binding his ribcage.

She focused on her task, her tongue trapped between her teeth as she reached her arms around him. Her loose white-blond curls brushed against his face as she carefully administered to him and his nostrils filled with the heady scent of her shampoo and the light floral fragrance she wore. After she had secured the bandages with a clip, she reached for the disinfectant to treat his arm. Her hands were gentle as they handled him, an apology for the sting on her lips before she’d even applied it to his flesh. When she finally touched him again with those delicate hands, he stiffened. She bit her lip, worrying the plump flesh, and he felt his ardor rise as cornflower blue eyes, unfettered by glasses, flooded with sympathy for his discomfort. He missed her glasses; it had been easier to pretend not to see the looks she saved only for him when she wore the thick dark frames. Without them, her sweet expressions were excruciating.

He was used to pain, the small sting of the alcohol and betadine a mere nuisance for him. No, the real torture was her: her smell, her touch. She didn’t seem to see the man others feared, only a man worthy of her kindness and attention. Bruce had been without such unconditional love for so long he’d almost forgotten what it felt like. If he’d had any faith at all in what he considered the pseudo-science of psychiatry he was sure there would be some sort of nonsense about his mother that would come into play. Probably something along the lines of a craving for maternal affection transforming itself into sexual desire, but that wasn’t it. There was no Oedipal Complex at play here, it was just her.

He closed his eyes and willed her to get on with it, trying desperately not to alert her to what he was feeling as she applied the suture gel onto the wound and carefully held the torn skin together until the glue had set. When it was done and she had checked for seepage she whispered, “I know that hurt but at least it was better than me trying to sew you up, right? I can’t even sew on a button much less fix an arm.” She smiled at him then, her lips soft as the love poured from her eyes and into his own.

Where did eyes that color even come from? He thought. He cleared his throat, dismissing the randomness of the observation from his mind. “Gauze.”

“What?” She asked in confusion as she concentrated on cleaning all the blood up from around the wound she had just repaired.

“For the cut; gauze—to cover the wound.”

“Oh! Yeah, right.” She blushed. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Bruce said quietly, averting his gaze to the banks of monitors on the far side of the cave. She gathered her supplies then plopped down beside him on the cot and wrapped the wound quickly before taping it off. “There! How’s that look?”

He turned his head and examined the bandage thoroughly. “Looks good.” He looked up, realizing just how close they had gotten.
She smiled back gratefully, completely oblivious to his licentious thoughts, proud to have earned the praise of a broken man who was far too old for her, and far to hardened to be anywhere near something as pure as herself.

There was no conscious thought, no internal debate, no hesitant look followed by her silent approval. He wasn’t some fresh-faced boy who dithered over what he could and couldn’t have at that moment. No, she was the innocent, not him. He was battle-hardened, scarred, and too far gone at that point. All thoughts of common decency, of the disproportionate age gap, of the fact that this was the youngest child of one of the few men whose trust he actually valued, disappeared and he acted.

He reached for her, pulling her body flush with his own as he claimed her mouth. It was hard and almost punishing, not the kind of kiss one uses when seducing a virgin. He met her confused resistance and he plowed through. He ran his tongue over her closed lips and when she gasped he opened her up and devoured her. He cupped her head in one hand, his fingers sinking deep into her light blonde hair, tugging and allowing the silken strands to wrap around his calloused fingers.

He laid her backwards gently as he covered her tiny frame with his own, his mouth never releasing possession. The hand at her waist moved upwards to cup her breast through her thin shirt. She whimpered and the sound ripped through him causing him to lose what little sense of restraint he still had.

He pulled away from the kiss to pull the shirt up over her head then unfastened the hooks of her bra and discarded it. He kissed the pale mounds of flesh each in turn, teasing her nipples with his tongue and teeth as his fingers found the fastening of her jeans. He pulled them down without ceremony along with the plain white panties she wore, breaking away just long enough to snatch the penny-loafers from her feet so he could let the last of her clothing drop to the floor. Bruce held back for just a moment to look at her, his angel, her hair a mussed halo of light around her head, and her body flushed with newly awakened desire. He slanted his lips over hers again, pulling his underwear down just enough to free his erection then hitching her thighs up around him so he could grind his hips into her center.

She gasped, both hands pushing at his chest as she felt the sting of him against her. Bruce could feel her heart pounding against his chest in pain and fear. He pulled away from her slightly, jaw clenching as he forced himself to remain still against her even though the only thing he could think about was sinking into her over and over again until he drove out all of his demons. In all his years, among the dozens of women who’d shared his bed, he’d never taken a virgin. He’d avoided it. Virgins were complicated. Virgins made love; they didn’t just screw and leave. Again he felt the flutter of apprehension in the pit of his stomach. This is wrong, stop while you can, the voice in the back of his mind ordered but he didn’t want to stop. He was too far gone, too close. Even though he knew this would not end well, he wanted this, wanted her. He’d already had a taste of her and he would have rather faced an army with his bare hands than stop at that moment.

“If you don’t want this you need to tell me and I’ll stop,” he told her, his body vibrating in protest as the words left his mouth.

He watched as fear and uncertainty battled with newly awakened desire in her reflective depths and, had he been a better man, he would have done the right thing and sent her away so she could save her innocence for someone more deserving. He should have told her to wait for someone who would speak words that no longer held meaning for him, who would place a ring on her finger, fill her with his children, and live an uncomplicated life far away from the ugliness that surrounded his own. Her first time shouldn’t be on a gurney with a bloody and bruised man, stinking of sweat, his soul as scarred as his body, too filled with lust to see to it she was properly prepared before he first pressed his way inside. He should have told her to gather her clothes and never look back. “Tell me,” he
commanded his eyes dark and almost hypnotic as he willed her to answer in the way he knew would bring them both to completion, “Yes or no?”

“Yes,” she said softly and he nearly growled in triumph as he claimed her mouth once again.

His rough fingers reached down through the thin curling strands of nearly translucent silk that did nothing to hide her from his gaze as his mouth claimed her tight pink nipple again. She panted roughly as he licked and sucked at her breast, his teeth scraping until she was half undone by the near painful sensations being awoken within her. He slid his fingers up and down, barely skimming the cluster of nerves that would ensure her readiness for him as he sucked hard at first her right nipple then the left. Her movements beneath him became more frantic. He took her mouth, whispering against her open lips, “That’s right, Baby. Come undone for me. Show me.” He gathered moisture from her center and found her clit.

She bucked underneath him crying out, her eyes opening wide as she opened herself up to the sensation of being made love to. He looked up into the stark wonder of her face and something dark began to curl in his belly. “Have you ever touched yourself, Baby? Here?” His finger swept over the sensitive bundle of nerves and he chuckled as her eyes slammed shut and she moaned wantonly under his touch. “What do you think about when you touch yourself? Tell me?”

“You,” she breathed and he felt his cock jump at the admission.

He took her mouth in an almost brutal kiss as his fingers increased the friction on her clit. He swallowed her cries as she orgasmed, a flood of moisture making his fingers slick. She shuddered and writhed in release beneath him. Releasing her mouth, he pressed their foreheads together as they both gasped for air. “Jesus,” he panted, “you are so beautiful. You have no idea do you; no idea just how goddamn beautiful you are?”

She tilted her mouth upward, her lips meeting his in a soft kiss. He moved his lips to coast along her jawline before making his way across her chest and down her waist. He eased off the cot and stripped off his underwear then took a moment to gaze at her most intimate and exposed self. His eyes caught hers and the dark desire he saw there was nearly his undoing. He bent at the waist, pulling her thighs apart, and swept his tongue over her folds, wet and glistening under the florescent lights from her orgasm. His senses filled with the taste of warm musk as she cried out, whimpered, and panted through the sweet torture he was now administering.

He brought a finger into her opening and carefully probed her as he licked and sucked at the sensitive bundle of fibers above. God, she was tight. He continued to explore her as he came up with a game plan. He wasn’t the kind of man who felt the need to compare the size of his dick with other men in order to prove himself but he knew he was fairly large and that this wouldn’t be easy for her. He’d have to take this slowly. He added a second finger and she hissed, stiffening not in pleasure but in discomfort. He eased back up the cot, his fingers still buried within her, and he kissed her softly in apology. “I know, Baby. I know it hurts but we’re going to take this slow, okay? Tell me when.”

Slowly her muscles began to loosen and he began to gently probe her once more. She winced slightly but he continued to soothe her with soft kisses and gentle words until she was again moving her hips to the rhythm he set for her, brushing her clit with his thumb to bring her added pleasure. After a while he added a third finger and repeated the process, careful not to tear or bruise her, until his hand was again slick with her juices. When she felt she was ready, he removed his hand from between her thighs and settled himself until he was in contact with the now vacant space. He rubbed himself up and down, gathering her moisture for lubrication before easing forward.

Her fingers gripped his shoulders painfully and he winced as she put pressure too close to the wound on his arm. “It’s okay; I won’t go further until you’re ready. We have all the time in the world.” He
reached up, easing her hands downward until they grabbed his hips and kissed her once more. He waited until the pressure of her grip loosened and again pressed forward, repeating the process inch by inch until the final barrier was passed and he was finally seated fully within her.

For a moment, they just breathed. He stopped, allowing his heartbeat to calm. He closed his eyes, resting his forehead against her shoulder as he calmed the beast within him that wanted to simply take that which he now knew belonged to him and him alone. He could hear the low hum of the computers, the fluttering of wings in the shadows of the cave, the uneven tempo of her breathing. Slowly he began rocking his hips, in and out, his thrusts gradually deepening until she was gasping more from pleasure than pain. His jaw clenched as he felt himself being squeezed within her walls, the sensation almost overwhelming. He tried to keep himself centered, tried to hold off the rush of his own release, but it quickly became apparent that he would not last long enough to give her the full measure of her first experience he had desired to. That would have to come later.

He increased his strokes, pushing deeper and deeper, his mouth open in a silent cry as the blood rushed to his head and he unleashed within her. She cried out as well, in pleasure and feminine triumph if not orgasm, and he shuddered until he was fully spent.

He eased onto his good shoulder, pulling out of her as he drew her into his embrace. He felt her sob against him, overwhelmed by everything they had done and felt together.

“Are you okay?” He asked softly, kissing the top of her head, the guilt and self-recriminations already coming to bear. What had he done? Christ, what the hell had he been thinking? He was way too old for this shit and she was far too young for him. He looked down at her tears and swallowed, the first flares of panic erupting in his chest. Shit, what if he’d hurt her more than he realized? “Baby? Answer me; are you okay?”

She nodded against his chest, her breath hitching as she spoke in a small voice, “I’m good, you?”

His head tilted back and hit the padding of the gurney as he snorted in relief. He lifted his head smiled down at her, a rare and beauteous thing. “Oh, I think I’ll live.” He took a deep shuddering breath and pulled her tighter against him. “You are going to be the death of me, you know that? You snuck in under my radar and now what the hell am I supposed to do?”

She smiled, a small sad little smile, and in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper she told him, “I love you.”

There was something in her smile; something in the way she said those words that nearly broke him. He could see it; the knowledge that this was probably a one off that would never be repeated again, the recognition of the fact that he could never be hers but knowing that this was the last chance she probably had to tell him that she was his. More than anything he wanted to take that sad realization from her eyes and spend the rest of his life making sure she never had to feel that way ever again; so much so that he was tempted to say the words back to her even though they had long lost any meaning to him. He wanted that, but he knew it could never happen. He was no longer capable of that kind of life with anyone. He wouldn’t compound his sins by lying to her. If he still had a heart that could break, then that was the moment it would have chosen to shatter into a million pieces. He would not be able to fix this and they both knew it.

His heart clenched and he dropped a kiss against her forehead before getting off the table to walk over to the sink. He wet a towel and washed off his genitals before wringing out a wash cloth and taking it over to her. He patted her thighs to indicate that she should spread her legs. She blushed, but obeyed, and he carefully cleaned her wiping the blood and semen from her center before tossing it into a nearby hamper and offering her his hand. “Come on, get up.”
“Where are we going?” She asked.

“Upstairs,” he told her with an upturn of his lips. He might not be able to give her forever but he’d give her what he could for the brief time they had left. “We need to take a shower and, call me old fashioned, but there are some things that I would prefer to do in the comfort of my own bed.”

“I don’t mind.” Felicity said shyly as she reached down for her shirt to hold it against her naked breasts.

He chuckled and smoothed his hands over her goose-pimpled flesh. He leaned down to whisper in her ear, “Oh, but Baby, think of how much fun it will be without a cold draft and warm sheets?”

They made love all weekend; glorious, passionate love that made him feel young again or, at the very least, his true age and not the unfathomable decades the responsibilities placed upon him had added to the thirty-six years he’d already spent upon this planet. He allowed himself to let go of the tight control he normally maintained in every aspect of his life so that he could experience everything through her eyes. He let go of his pain, his regret, and his anger for her. It wasn’t those three words, but it was still just as meaningful in its own way.

They spent days in his bed leaving only to scavenge for food or to use the bathroom. He taught her all the ways he knew how to make love; in his bed, on the floor, in the shower. The one thing he denied her was, in fact, those three words; the very words she so wholeheartedly gave him. Every time she’d whisper them to him when his eyes were closed or when she thought his attention was elsewhere his heart would clench and he became even more determined to leave her with the best memory he could of their time together.

Thinking back on it now, he wondered if he’d done that for himself as well. He’d loved women, many women; some with a passion that bordered on true love, but she was different. Felicity was pure light, the only light he had ever felt in his entire existence it seemed. It was as though she shone from the inside and everything became clearer in her presence; emotions, thoughts… He became a better man, a better version of himself around her, and he was loathe to let that go. There were days to come where the only thing that kept him going was the memory of those words and the taste of her lips on his.

On the last night of their stolen weekend together, everything changed. He opened a drawer and seen the box of unopened condoms there and realized that he hadn’t even thought to protect her. How that had happened he had no idea. It was as though all good sense had abandoned him and he was faced with the possibility that he might have forced her into an impossible situation because of his thoughtlessness. He went to her to discuss the situation and she assured him that she had been on the pill since she was fifteen in order to regulate her cycle and that they had nothing to worry about. To his surprise he’d almost been disappointed by that revelation. That had shocked him but he chalked it up to low blood sugar or some primitive instinct that had merely crept up from his subconscious and was just as quickly dismissed. Later as he held her close, sleep pulling at him and causing his mind to wander to places it had no business going, he thought about days yet to come, of the possibilities and outcomes that he knew lay within her own innocent dreams. He dreamt of giving her the life he could never have, the family he had never wanted, and when he woke up he knew that their brief respite had come to a close.

On Monday morning he explained to her in a detached voice that he couldn’t give her the kind of relationship she deserved. He told her that whatever the weekend had meant to her, for him it was just sex and she had just been a warm body to lose himself in for a while. He couldn’t do commitment and marriage because it wasn’t possible. Not for him. He told her he did not love her but that he had enjoyed their moment. He assured her she would be welcome to remain on the team,
but they could not remain lovers.

Part of him thought she’d plead with him, beg him to reconsider. He expected tears, but was surprised and then somewhat relieved when she calmly nodded in acceptance. She thanked him for his honesty, assured him that she could make her own way home, and he left her to use his shower and get dressed but not before making sure she had adequate cab fare home. He didn’t try to kiss her goodbye. At the time he’d wanted to do the honorable thing, make a clean break and not play with her emotions by sending mixed signals, but later he’d come to regret that decision. He should have kissed her just one more time. When she didn’t come back to the cave…

He should have kissed her.

The first few days after she left he was able to completely expunge her from his thoughts or at least pretend to. They had both entered into the situation with eyes wide open, the itch had been scratched, and now it was over he kept reminding himself whenever his thoughts would wander in her direction. The fact that she had been a virgin or that she thought she was in love with him was irrelevant. He had his mission and the mission was where his focus had to remain. She would only have been a distraction. To remind himself of that, when his team returned he worked them hard, determined to make up for the days he’d lost as he held her in his arms.

By Wednesday night, while staring over his city, he realized that he shouldn’t have been so harsh with her. After all, she seemed to handle their encounter rather maturely. And besides, this was Felicity and not some innocent little run of the mill teenager. She was brilliant and, although she was young, she was more poised than women twice her age would have been under the circumstances. Perhaps, just perhaps, there could develop something between them. Yes, there was a not so insignificant age gap but he was incredibly fit due to his nightly activities and still a relatively young man. They wouldn’t look ridiculous together and if anyone could handle the rigors of his double life it was her. Perhaps he had acted too hastily.

By Thursday he had left her several messages that had gone unanswered. He began to worry then. His mind began to tumble between guilt and jealousy. Perhaps she had already moved on. At her age the idea of sex without commitment or emotional fallout had become the new normal. He thought of the look in her eyes that first time, her acceptance of what was happening between them, and wondered if another man had already caught her attention. He quickly discarded the notion but the thought still lingered. Someday, sooner rather than later, there would be another man, a man who would say the words he couldn’t. Felicity was a beautiful woman, she wouldn’t be alone long. He became short tempered and snappish with his team and even more distracted.

Finally, on Friday afternoon, he bit the bullet and went to see Lucius to do the right thing and state his intentions before pursuing anything further. If Barbara knew what he was about to do she would have slapped him upside the head and called him all kinds of stupid, and she was right; he was an idiot, but that didn’t make him wrong. He’d decided sometime during the day as he bounced between feeling completely lost and distracted, to falling into a temper rarely seen outside of cape and cowl, that he would just cut through all the nonsense and marry her.

As completely insane as it was to think about it now, at the time it had sounded reasonable. He was at the right age for marriage. Forty was creeping up on him and he was getting too old to pull off the playboy routine without seeming pathetic. There would be no more rumors to deal with, no more having to explain his quick exits to whatever woman was hanging off his arm. Felicity was smart; she could help him both in the boardroom as well as on his mission. She was, after all, the daughter of Lucius Fox and although she had always seemed uninterested in the business side of the technology field he was sure she’d step up to the plate and learn what she needed to. As Mrs. Wayne she could represent him at all the inconveniently scheduled meetings he now had to miss when
mission business came up, attend the endless scores of society parties on his arm and then stay and offer a distraction as he slipped off into the shadows. Also she was young enough that they could wait a few years to start a family. Although fatherhood was not something he had necessarily ever wanted, she deserved to have children and he’d make adjustments for it if he absolutely had to. After all, it was the least he could do.

Already his body was showing the strain of his nightly activities and, in a few years, he’d have to turn the mission over to Dick or Tim or some other younger man and then he could devote himself to raising a family upstairs while he trained a new generation of guardians below. He might even expand his mission globally. He’d been thinking on that for a while and Felicity could use her technical skills to help make that happen. This wouldn’t be a marriage based on hormones or the ridiculous concept of romantic love; no, they were better than that. She was an intelligent woman and once he laid it all out before her she’d see that. Besides, he did care about her deeply and they were sexually compatible; their union would be a happy one, he’d see to that. Now all he had to do was actually get her to talk to him. He walked into Lucius’s office with that singular plan in mind and determination in his step.

A little past midnight on Saturday, one week after he’d made love for the first time to the woman he’d decided to make his wife, he was sitting on a rooftop overlooking the city, cape and cowl in place once again. Felicity had accepted a job offer in Starling City that she had been considering for some time and had left earlier in the week to scout for apartments. Lucius had been proud of her, proud that she wanted to do it on her own and without his interference. The only person at the company aware of the connection was his friend, Walter Steele, who assured him he would merely look out for her as one concerned parent to another and he would allow her to succeed or fail without his intervention. There was nothing hidden or guarded in the other man’s speech so Bruce had accepted his story that this was not a sudden move for her and that it was a decision she had made long before he took her into his bed.

He should have kissed her, was the one thought that kept chasing him that night. He thought he behaved the way he had for her sake but that wasn’t true. He had been so worried about hurting her feelings, of making her feel as though he’d taken something from her under false pretenses, that he’d never stopped to think that perhaps he’d be the one in pain when all was said and done. The truth was that if he had kissed her, if he had shown the slightest bit of tenderness toward her that morning, he wouldn’t have been able to let her go.

The hardest part was when he realized that while he had wasted a week wrestling with all that in his head, she had already moved on.

For the next six months after she left town, his family had to deal with a Batman in the foulest mood they had ever seen him in since Selina had left almost two years previously.

Bruce rarely drank. He hated the loss of control that came with overindulgence, but as he sipped the glass of twelve year old Purcell’s Single Barrel Straight Bourbon held within his hand he appreciated the warm burn of it as it slid down his throat. It was the only liquor he ever drank and then only rarely. The American whiskey wasn’t as trendy or refined as the more popular single malt imported scotches but it he had been his father’s drink of choice. In the last several years he’d only tasted it four times, this being the fifth; once for Jason, once for Stephanie, once for Damian, and now twice for Felicity. That hurting her equaled the pain he’d felt at the loss of one of his ‘children’ was something he chose not to examine too closely.

He let the notes of hickory, caramelized sugar, and fruity bites of cinnamon and cherries roll over his tongue as he thought of how he’d treated her and of the fact that he had no right to interfere in her life. He left her alone for a reason but this was different. This wasn’t him going to rekindle a love
affair; this was her life at stake. He’d changed and so had she. She was no longer the 19 year old girl whose innocence he had taken so long ago. She was an adult with her own life and a successful career. For all he knew she and Queen could be sharing a bed together, her memories of him merely a novelty to be trotted out occasionally. Perhaps it was Felicity who sought the Arrow out instead? Perhaps she had traded one broken vigilante in for a newer model? Maybe Queen was his replacement: A younger, faster, newer city guardian who, if caught in the same position, wouldn’t be afraid to look like a walking talking midlife crisis with a sweet faced blonde on his arm. Perhaps he had already given her those words he couldn’t and had actually meant them.

He emptied his glass and sat it down on the tray table, waving off the attendant as she offered him another. One was his limit.

He needed to keep a clear head because, even if all that was true and more, Felicity was in danger; whatever the case, whether this life was something she had chosen for herself or not, the Arrow had put her in the line of fire and that was unacceptable. Not only that but he allowed his trash to muck around in his city and that would not, could not stand.
Felicity had spent most of Thursday trying to figure out how she could head Bruce off at the pass. She wasn’t worried about the hit; she didn’t even see it as something to alert the team to. She’d dismissed it as a non-issue after only a few minutes of internal debate and realized that if she told
Oliver or Diggle about it then it would take them too off-mission. It couldn’t have been Blood or Slade; if they wanted her dead they could have killed her several dozen times over by now and they wouldn’t have hired anyone to do it, that wasn’t their style. No, she knew exactly who had ordered it, the timing was too coincidental for it to be anyone else, and she was dead.

Moira.

Even from the grave that woman had a way of messing with her entire week.

She sighed, staring at her monitor but not seeing a damn thing. If it was Moira then telling Oliver would just add more pain to what he already had to endure. Merlyn, his son, now this? No, she couldn’t put him through that again, and if she was wrong then she’d been a sitting duck for a year and a half and she was still there. Between that, the fact that the hit had been canceled, and Moira Queen’s tombstone, she figured there was at least a 98% chance she was in the clear and she was willing to take those odds.

With that out of the way the only thing she had left to worry about was Bruce.

It was so weird, she thought. She’d left Gotham more than four years ago and Bruce hadn’t so much as bothered to call her but now, at least according to Barb, he was rushing down here to protect her from some perceived threat. A bullshit threat at that. Perhaps some women in her position would feel flattered by the thought of the dark brooding hero rushing to the side of the woman he had long ago left behind but she was just really, really ticked off.

So what if she’d had a crush on him for most of her life? So what if he was the first man, the only man, she’d shared her bed with so far? Yeah, it was good and all but he hurt her in the cruelest way possible in the end. She didn’t expect him to fall on his knees and declare his undying love but he could have treated her with the same courtesy he would show to the guy delivering their pizza! She hadn’t known what to expect but it hadn’t been him standing over her fully dressed, his expression hard and closed off, as he woke her up to tell her that this weekend had been a mistake and he couldn’t afford to have her distract him from the mission. He then politely and coolly asked her to get dressed and told her that if she didn’t feel up to letting him take her home that he had left cab fare on the nightstand.

Cab fare. On the nightstand. Plus enough for a tip—for her or the cabbie, he didn’t say, but that’s sure as hell how it felt at the time. God, she’d felt so dirty. Afterwards she’d muttered a few words, too numb to come up with anything witty or spontaneous, gathered her things, and cried in the shower until long after his car had pulled out of the drive.

After she got up and threw on her clothes all she wanted to do was be as far away from Bruce as possible but she couldn’t do that in Gotham; not when half the buildings had his name on them including the one she lived in. Lucius had been encouraging her for months to accept the job at Queen Consolidated his friend, Walter Steele, had offered her. She had been adamant that she didn’t want to work at Wayne Enterprises like everyone else in their family did but then Bruce started noticing her and she kept putting off the decision. Starling City was almost three thousand miles away from Gotham, three thousand miles from her family, her friends, and him. By the time the cab pulled up she had already phoned the QC Head of Resources and let her know she could start immediately; Bruce’s cab fare still sitting where he’d left it as she walked out of the manor for the last time. During the long cab ride back into the city she called her dad and told him, made travel arrangements, set up an appointment to have a real estate agent meet her at her hotel, and then started packing the minute she got home.

The next day she was looking at her new house which was small by wealthy Starling City standards but huge in comparison to anything she could ever afford in Gotham if she chose to live on her salary
alone. It was a two bedroom bungalow with an open floor plan but still true to the 1940’s architecture. It was perfect; twenty minutes from QC with a small postage stamp yard in a lovely but slightly rundown neighborhood at the edge of the Glades called Adam Heights in the historical district near Orchid Bay.

Lucius had offered to buy her a condo in the safest part of town closer to Lamb Valley or allow her to take the money from her trust to get whatever she needed but she’d refused. She had sold several programs to WayneTech which had earned her a tidy sum she kept untouched in a savings account. As much as she was loathe to taint her fresh start with money from Bruce, she’d also earned that money fair and square. It was hers, not his, and so she bit the bullet and withdrew enough to pay up her lease for the first year but she also made sure to replace it as soon as she was able to. She made a point of not touching that money again and living off her own paychecks after that. It was important to her that she showed everyone, even the people she loved, that she could stand on her own two feet. The experience of her failed liaison had seriously messed with her self-esteem and she needed to reestablish her own sense of empowerment.

In fact, it had affected her so much that she only started thinking about dating again (or for the first time rather) a couple of years ago and look how that turned out. Not only did he basically break up with her after a day and get hit by lightning, but he started dating another girl while he was still in a fricking coma.

Barry, she sighed. She really liked him. He felt comfortable, safe. He might not have made her heart pound like a certain set of vigilantes did but, before the accident, he certainly wouldn’t have spent the night only to pretend nothing happened the next day. She never would have thought then that he’d turn out to be the type of guy to don a mask and go racing off into the night in a blur leaving her behind in his dust, but her curse had extended there as well. Now he was a super-speedy hero named ‘the Flash’ with a coma girlfriend and she was still alone.

And then there was Daniel.

Nice handsome rich guy who seems to really be into her and, surprise! Turns out he’s another freaking mask, she thought miserably. Yeah, if she was a superstitious person she’d think she was cursed.

Of course, Daniel never really ‘date’ dated her. They went out but he wasn’t actually dating her as much as he was trying to get closer to Oliver so technically Daniel and Oliver were the ones dating and she was just their intermediary.

Which was not only weird and confusing, but a huge blow to what little bit of ego she had left. It was all very disappointing because, despite using her to further his own mission, Dan Garret had been a really great guy when all was said and done; handsome, smart, deep, funny…even though he was a complete and utter putz for using her and preying on her emotions.

She scowled, that he had the balls to ask her to leave Oliver’s mission and be his tech instead after all was said and done, then follow that up by tossing in an offer to date her ‘for real’ just to sweeten the deal… She shook her head ruefully, like quitting the Arrow so she could be his really personal assistant in the office, the mission, and the bedroom was something she’d ever go for in a million years. Still, she kept their parting classy even though she was really, really tempted to let him have it; especially after he suggested her reasons for turning him down had more to do with the fact that she was hung up on Oliver, and not because he had targeted her by assuming she was so desperate for attention that she could easily be manipulated into spilling all of the Arrow’s secrets.

Yes, Virginia, all masks are ego-centric pricks who have their heads up their own asses.
She ran her hand over her scalp and tightened her ponytail. At least Barry seemed to like her for who she was and not because she was a potential asset to his mission…until, of course, he got hit by lightning, became a superhero, and gained a coma-girlfriend who was not only freaking gorgeous, but funny, sweet, and smart.

Yep, she was cursed.

Damn it, she thought as she rubbed her temples and stared at the sandwich on her desk. This whole thing was giving her a migraine. Her temples were throbbing and her neck was in knots. “Crap,” she sighed as she rolled her neck and heard it snap, crackle, and pop like a bowl of puffed rice.

She yawned. They were really going to have to recruit a chiropractor to Team Arrow soon. Man, what she wouldn’t give for a massage; that or a good night’s sleep. Barbara’s phone call hadn’t exactly made for sweet dreams the night before.

Her ‘relationship’ with Barry had ended before it had even begun because he told her he thought she was in love with Oliver, something she had vehemently denied at the time. Okay, so maybe Barry had a point. Maybe she was in too deep with Oliver and maybe she did have feelings where he was concerned but nothing—nothing—was going to ever happen between them. Oliver had made that very clear…in a sort of vague, muddled way…

“Because of the life I lead…I think it’s better that I not be with someone I could really care about.”

But what did that mean exactly? Did it mean that he had feelings for her? Was it in reference to the fact that he was keeping his distance from Laurel? Although he’d gone back to Laurel twice since then, both times ending in disaster.

Why he kept going back was a mystery to her; you’d think he’d have figured out by now that they were toxic together. It was bad enough before she knew his secret but after…?

Ugh.

Her mind flashed back to the first time the willowy brunette showed up to the Lair and stated her intentions to fill in as Sara’s replacement by becoming the Canary. Yeah, like that was ever going to work, she thought. The second they heard the words come out of Laurel’s mouth, she turned to Dig and whispered the words ‘I give it six months—or maybe three’.

Totally nailed it.

The only relationships Oliver was less successful with than his love affairs with the Lance sisters, were his relationships with female masks; combine the two and it’s bound to end in fireworks and tears.

Then again, Oliver’s whole intimacy dodge could just be him trying to do damage control and let her down easy because he saw how upset she was that he had slept with the Soviet Slut. It’s not like Oliver was ever the kind of guy who dealt with stuff; he was more of an ‘I have a feeling? Let me react to this by fucking up my life so completely that it destroys everything around me,’ kind of guy. His girlfriend presses him for a commitment, and he reacts by sleeping with her sister, impregnating yet another random girl at a party, and getting stranded on a desert island for five years. His dad sacrifices himself so that Oliver can live, and he reacts to his trauma by putting on green leather and shooting criminals with arrows…then goes back to sleeping with all of the same women who got him to that point in the first place, allowing the woman he has the most guilt over to don a costume and endanger herself on a nightly basis compounding his already soul crushing levels of guilt, only to repeat the whole ‘push me/pull me’ thing leading to her having a total nervous breakdown.
Can we say ‘Vicious Cycle’, kids?

Yeah, Oliver was so screwed up emotionally that not even Doctor Phil had a shot in hell of fixing him when he was on a roll. Not that Bruce was much better. I mean, really, she pondered, when it came down to it, they were basically the same man.

An inability to deal with their feelings in a nonviolent, constructive way?

Check.

A fondness for leaping from rooftop to rooftop as people are shooting them and accept that as normal?

Check.

Intimacy issues?

Oh hell to the yes.

Fathering a kid you didn’t know about who turns up one day out of the blue?

Holy fuck, we’re on a roll.

Destructive arch-nemesis that wreak havoc with their emotions and make them go stupid just by hearing their name?

Uh, Joker, Slade, Merlyn, Ra’s al Ghul (that’s a two-fer)…yeah, that list could go on for a while.

Mommy and Daddy issues?

A big check for both of them on that one. Bruce saw his parents murdered before his eyes and it set him on his path and Oliver’s dad blew his brains out in front of him after telling him to make up for his sins and his mother, who was a piece of work in and of herself, gets shish-kebaped in a reenactment of the worst moment of his life right in front of him by his arch enemy who used to be his friend. Talk about a psychiatrist’s field day.

The really sad thing was that she really couldn’t honestly say which one was worse off. They were both fairly fucked in the head at this point.

By rights it should be Bruce since he’s older and his issues were probably more wide spread and destructive. In the family category, Oliver had enabling parents who fixed everything by handing their kids a credit card and the keys to the liquor cabinet but, other than that, he enjoyed a relatively pleasant childhood. His issues started after he hit the age of consent. Bruce had an enabling guardian in Alfred, but his version of enabling involved helping him to become a masked vigilante by teaching him spy craft and arranging for him to be trained by some of the greatest martial arts masters in the world then helping him take revenge on the criminals of Gotham by becoming Batman.

Yeah, that…that wasn’t healthy but, if you had to compare them in terms of which one was slightly not as ‘not healthy’, eh…

Okay, as insane as it sounded, in her humble opinion spy craft and bat ears beat alcohol and unlimited credit limits in terms of parenting. If nothing else, at least it gave him structure.

Felicity furrowed her brow and muttered under her breath, “Okay, yeah, that says something about how low my standards have fallen, doesn’t it?”
If their family lives were fraught with angst and tragedy, their romantic lives were, sad to say, an even bigger disaster.

Not including her own experience with him, each and every relationship Bruce had ever been in ended badly. Either he left them; they left him, prison, nuthouse, or death. Not a pretty picture. Women who were bad for him he loved, women who were good for him were rejected, and women who were criminally insane? Well, see prison, nuthouse, or death.

But even with all that shiny shiny happiness going in the Bruce column, Oliver was almost worse. Bruce, one could argue, came by his intimacy issues naturally. He was just a kid when he saw his parents die and had no real concept of a healthy relationship except the one he’d seen through the eyes of an eight year old and that had not ended on a high point. To him, love equated death. Oliver didn’t have that excuse; he was FUBARed even before the island. Bruce’s life was screwed up by his dedication to the mission but Oliver’s issues...yeesh.

Oliver wasn’t so much a playboy as he was a boy who got played. As always it started with mommy: Moira Queen. Felicity didn’t trust Moira when she was alive and, although it was supposedly wrong to speak ill of the dead, she still didn’t like her very much. The woman had threatened her and she would not forget the looks she had shot her way when she called her bluff and told Oliver about Thea’s connection to Malcolm Merlyn. When she’d heard about the hit being placed on her Moira’s name was the first one that had popped into her mind. The only reason she hadn’t investigated the broker Barbara mentioned yet was because she was afraid Oliver would find out.

Already she had risked her relationship with Oliver by telling him about his mother two years ago in connection to Merlyn and then again a few months later when she’d uncovered the fact that he had a son by a girl he knocked up living in Central City. It turned out that Moira had paid her off while he was a freshman in college to say she had a miscarriage so he’d be let off the hook. Any fond remembrances he’d had of his mother were destroyed after that and she was responsible. If she discovered his mother arranged to have her killed then she shuddered to think of what the emotional consequences would be for him. The fact that the contract was rescinded around the same time she took a chance and told Oliver the truth was telling as well. Before Oliver knew the truth, killing her would have made perfect sense from a strategic point of view. After he found out however...

Moira wasn’t stupid. Oliver would have connected the dots instantly and, although Moira may or may not have known what her son was truly capable of, she’d have to be blind not to see that he’d inherited some of her darkness. He said that she claimed to have known his true identity for well over a year before the night she’d died, but Felicity had her doubts. If she did know that was worse because she shot him and didn’t say boo afterwards. Even if she hadn’t known then he was the Arrow, one would think she would have found time to send a fruit basket when she did find out, right? Holy fuck, the woman used to send engraved thank you cards to the guy who did her Botox injections, you’d think she could scrape up enough humanity to send a cookie bouquet to her own kid for putting a bullet in his chest! No one in the Lair ever seemed to notice that part except her. Still, if it gave him comfort, so be it. Lying about that was the least of her sins.

Even in her more tender and loving moments with her family there was something about the woman had set her teeth on edge. No one could argue that she didn’t love her family, because she did. She loved her children dearly but there was always a brittle aura to the woman, something that stiffened your spine and made you take a step back from her. When most people described her they used words like ‘dauntless’, ‘formidable’, or ‘iron-willed’ but those words, though true, didn’t quite fit with the Moira she knew that most people never got to see if they were lucky. This was a woman who paid off Sandra Hawke to fake a miscarriage and hide the fact that Oliver had a son, was a part of a vast criminal conspiracy, was complicit in the kidnapping of her own husband and the attempted
kidnapping of her son, she shot him shortly afterwards (see cookie bouquet), was at least partially responsible for the deaths of hundreds (although not convicted), and never even bothered telling anyone that the guy she was supposedly so scared of that she let him plant a Markov device under the Glades was freaking alive! She had many words she could’ve used to describe Moira Queen (‘ruthless’ being a prime example, ‘cold-blooded ice bitch’ was another) before she died at the hands of Slade Wilson two years previously, but none of it came close to anything that would inspire the warm and fuzzies. It was as though she had this aura of frost around her that chilled you to the very bone if you got too close.

She remembered all too well the emotional fallout from that woman’s death as Oliver and Thea struggled with her passing. As difficult as it was for Thea, in many ways it had been ten times worse for Oliver because he blamed himself for everything that had happened. Again, Felicity had been forced to remain silent; all she could do is offer comfort and sympathy. She was, after all, for better or worse his mom.

Moira loved her children but something told her that setting boundaries and enforcing rules hadn’t been a priority in the Queen household. Moira was the kind of woman who thought that loving her children meant giving them free reign to the point that they never had to even think about the consequences of their actions. There were times when she, Tam, and Luke would have loved to grow up like that but, after getting to know Oliver and seeing the problems he and Thea had, she was grateful that they didn’t.

If Moira had been a strange mix of maternal ferocity and ice cold calculation, Robert had been her opposite. Oliver took a lot of his strength from Moira but most of his weaknesses came from Robert. Like Oliver, Robert had a wandering eye and was a bit of a partier. His affairs were numerous and not well hidden and Moira, despite being a strong and formidable woman, remained within the marriage without complaint. In her way, she loved him but their marriage became less about love and more about business towards the end. As a result, Oliver grew up with a warped idea of what marriage and commitment meant. Robert was also a man who, although strong in purpose and a good businessman, let women lead him around by his nose (as well as a few other choice body parts). He was probably even more permissive with his children than Moira was at times and he had a habit of running away from his problems and keeping secrets. Despite all that, Oliver loved his father very much. It was hard for him to resolve the memories he had of a fun loving, outdoorsy, brash man like Robert Queen with a man who could be part of a conspiracy to destroy the lives of hundreds of people.

Just like his father, Oliver seemed continually trapped between all the women in his life and there had been a lot of them; each and every one of them somehow related to his own parent’s relationship in some way. Laurel, so cool and controlling yet enabling and steadfast through all of Oliver’s infidelities was Moira, but Sara, passionate, reckless, and rebellious, was Robert. Helena was part of the guilt and anger he felt towards his father. Sandra…

She took a breath; Sandra Hawke was in a category all her own. In a lot of ways, Sandra was her. She so easily could have been that girl. Hell, she was that girl for Bruce; the only difference was that she didn’t have a child as a result of her one moment of weakness.

Her breath slowed as she turned that over in her mind; would Bruce have paid her two million dollars to take her child and go? No. No, Bruce would have probably done ‘the right thing’ and married her or, at least, offered to but he would have grown to resent her and their child. Of course, she also wouldn’t have taken the money had he offered but there was a big difference between her at age eighteen and Sandra. At eighteen she already had a doctorate and had completed her education, Sandra was still in school and paying for her education through grants and scholarships. She also had money and resources that Sandra didn’t. She could have raised her and Bruce’s child alone and
never had to worry about juggling her education, motherhood, or money. Had she been a young, unmarried college student from a humble background and pregnant, she probably would have done the same thing. Actually, had she been Sandra Hawke she probably wouldn’t have had the fortitude to take that challenge on in the first place; she probably would have given serious thought to terminating the pregnancy and moved on with her life without ever looking back.

A pang hit her heart then as the thought passed through her mind. She might have had a termination, but who knows? While she was completely 100% pro-choice, she also knew that it was a decision no woman ever made lightly. For better or worse, she slept with Bruce because she was in love with him and her child, however unexpected, would have been the result of that love even if it wasn’t reciprocated. Connor, on the other hand, was born from what was essentially a one night stand and Oliver was young, completely irresponsible, and both his family and hers were less than supportive of the pregnancy. The fact that she chose to have him anyway showed just how strong Sandra was. She might not have been under similar circumstances.

Her situation might not have been the same as Sandra’s, but it would have held its own challenges. Bruce was so entangled with her family that she couldn’t have prevented him from knowing about his child and he would have made it an issue whether he wanted to be a parent or not. Keeping the child would have meant having Bruce in her life forever. She couldn’t have escaped Bruce’s notice simply by moving away; he’d find her wherever she went. So, really, she couldn’t judge Sandra for taking her child and the check; she couldn’t even resent her for not telling Oliver the truth. Moira however…

If Moira hadn’t already been dead she would have killed her for that. Instead of blaming his mother, Oliver had blamed himself as usual. He had been young and stupid, Sandra had been equally young and naïve; what had been a one night, one-time thing for Oliver was a first time with far reaching consequences for Sandra and her son, Connor. Oliver found out he was a father only after they had been threatened and his status as the Arrow nearly cost them their lives. Seeing no other option, Oliver had turned his back and made the conscious decision not to try to parent Connor, allowing him and his mother to go into hiding instead. Even so, it still felt like he was running from his problems again as was his pattern, only this one involved a child and that had been one thing that Felicity couldn’t easily forgive.

That…that had been hard on her to watch him do that. As someone whose own bio-dad took a runner she’d had a hard time being sympathetic even though she knew why he felt it was for the best.

Sandra had moved on, there was a man in Connor’s life already who wanted to be his father, and he couldn’t risk his son’s life or rekindle something with Sandra when he knew they would always be in danger if he was in the picture. As Oliver drowned his sorrows in half the bar’s inventory, Felicity found herself again hating Moira to the point that she wanted to confront her gravestone about it, but what would be the point? On one hand she understood the woman was trying to protect her son’s future, but she knew firsthand how Connor would one day feel when he learned that his father had deliberately chosen not to be part of his life.

To this day, Felicity couldn’t understand how a woman who supposedly loved her children so much could do that to her own grandson. It made her think about the man who contributed his sperm to her mother’s womb. The impression she’d gotten from Peggy Ann had been that he was wealthy Euro-trash but that had been her own interpretation. Maybe that emotional distance came from being accustomed to such vast wealth their entire lives? Perhaps when you lived in a world where everyone always wanted something from you, one had to learn to keep some kind of distance to guard against the backlash.
Besides Laurel, Sara, and Sandra there had been others, of course: Shado, the woman who trained Oliver on how to use the bow and whom both he and Sara had serious lingering issues over, Helena, who Oliver tried playing Captain Arrow Saves-a-Ho-Sack-Of-Crazy for not once, not twice, but three times and, surprise, was that ever a perfect example of the term ‘epic fail’ or what? And, oh yeah, Isabel: a woman whose best quality is that she can take a punch aka the Bolshoi Bitch.

If Bruce was a bad relationship risk, then Oliver was even worse. Still, it was tempting because they were both Sex on a Stick with a couple of slices of Beefcake for dessert. The most intimate contact she’d ever had with Oliver involved him either swinging her across empty space while flying through a couple of plate glass windows or leaping over a detonated landmine but (when she wasn’t thinking about dying) it sure was fun. That and the whole watching him work out while he’s shirtless thing, that’s a perk they don’t think to put in the Employee Handbook. She may never have actually licked those abs but, in her mind, there’s a whole ten course feast going on and he’s definitely soup to nuts (because some nuts are just worth the epi-pen). Then there had been the thing right before they took down Slade the first time.

She blanched. Yeah, she didn’t like thinking about that these days. For a while though, Oliver telling her he loved her had put her on cloud nine even though she knew it had been just a ruse to save Laurel and get the ‘cure’ into Slade. For a day or two afterwards she even let herself think dangerous thoughts around the words ‘maybe’ and ‘what if’ only to have them completely dashed when Laurel started becoming a regular in the Lair. And, as per usual whenever Oliver became fixated on a woman, once he and Laurel restarted their romance she was once again left out in the cold.

Yup, her love life sucked, she thought miserably. She had a crush on a guy who seemed to look right through her, her last romance was with a guy who cheated on her while he was in a fricking coma, and as for Bruce; she would never go there again even if the man knew his way around her fun places. Still, even more than four years later, the memories of their one weekend together lingered. Too bad they were attached to a complete horse’s ass.

Felicity pushed her keyboard back; laid her head on her folded arms, and groaned. What the hell was she going to do about him? Here she was thinking naked relationship thoughts about one of the few people even more screwed up than Oliver Queen and he completely dumped her ass four years ago. Worse than dumped; he erased her from his world, so why was he coming back?

She knew the answer to that; masked vigilantes who feel entitled to refer to entire cities as ‘theirs’ don’t like sharing anything.

I hate this, I hate this, I hate this, Felicity thought over and over again like a mantra. Really, when it boiled down to it, it was because she made the mistake of giving Oliver access to a system based off of the original Watchtower decryption and AI program she had developed with Barbara. This was Bruce just being territorial and, man, talk about destroying a girl’s self-esteem all over again: You tell a guy you’ve loved him your whole life, give him your virginity, spend two days and three nights making love using every move in the Kama Sutra and a few you just invent on the spot, and he dumps you and never looks back until four years later when you give his computer program to another man and he finds out about a teeny little death threat THEN he gets jealous. It’s almost enough to make a girl want to chuck her tablet and go back to analog.

No, Felicity thought as she straightened up in her chair and pushed her glasses up off her nose, I’m not doing this to myself. It had taken her four years of hard work, emotional growth, and more pints of Ben and Jerry’s than it should have to get to a point in her life where Bruce, the Bat, and Gotham were a closed chapter of her life. He will not do this to me! She vowed, I will not be one of those women who falls apart over a man! He might be Batman, but she’s seen under the suit and, physical perfection, legendary temper, and bone melting kisses aside, he’s not all that intimidating! I’m too
smart for this, she thought as she took a deep breath. No Bruce and definitely no more naughty
thoughts about Oliver either. No matter how naked he gets in her presence…or how sweaty…or…

So, okay, maybe she did let herself get a little fuzzy around the edges where Oliver was concerned
but has she ever taken a bite out of that hunky-hunkishness of his? No. No, she has not. But she
could have. She’d caught him looking a couple of times as well. She may dress for success in the
office, but when she had to get suited up for formal functions she could wear the crap out of an
evening gown. She might have trust issues when it came to relationships but her self-esteem, as far as
her looks and brains went, was still rock solid. That said, should he ever cast his net into blonder,
smarter, and more computer savvy waters (meaning her) and seek to reel her in, would she take the
bait? No, he could just keep his worm in his pants where it belonged because she learned that lesson
the hard way.

The very, very hard way.

Hard. Like six-pack abs kind of hard. Like the marble in Bruce’s shower when he—

Felicity frowned and opened her desk drawer and started to search through it when Oliver walked in
the door. “Hey, what are you looking for?”

“No chocolate,” she muttered without looking up. “I could have sworn I had a Dove bar in here the
other day.”

“No chocolate?” Oliver asked as he watched her dig around in the drawer with amusement.

“Yeah, I suddenly got a craving like you wouldn’t believe,” she sighed, giving up and looking at
him morosely. “How was lunch with Isabel?”

“About as pleasant as a root canal,” he said in a wry tone. “If you want to head down to the
employee lounge and see what’s in the vending machine you can, then come back and we’ll go over
the game plan for tomorrow.”

“About that,” Felicity said, clearing her throat as she rose from her desk to follow him into his office
and shutting the door behind her.

“Yeah?” He acknowledged without looking at her as he plopped some files on his blotter before
moving over to the ‘coffee pot’ (he bought some Rube Goldberg looking brass coffee and espresso
machine for his office after she refused to make him any) and poured himself a cup. “Want one?”

“No, thanks. Um…Oliver?”

“Hmm?” He garbled as he pressed the cup to his lips and moved back to stand near his desk as he
sorted through the files.

“I was wondering, just how important is it that I be in tomorrow’s meeting?”

Oliver cleared his throat and set down his cup carefully, “Pardon?”

“I was wondering if it would be alright if I just skipped it and maybe took a few personal days
instead.”

“What?” Oliver said flatly, his tone and posture going from Ollie to Arrow in 0.2 seconds.

“Well, I was thinking,” Felicity tried not to fidget as Oliver fixed her with a hard eye. “A few, um,
personal issues have come up and I think that…well, I thought that since this is basically you and
Isabel’s show, more Isabel really, that maybe—“

“If this is about yesterday,” his voice hardened and he looked at her pointedly, “which you and I have yet to discuss—don’t think I’ve forgotten about it—I don’t even mention it during lunch. I don’t know what you two talked about but she’s apparently over it, at least for the moment, and she’s too invested in this proposal right now to tank it just to score points so I think we’re safe for now.”

“Well, that’s good!” She said brightly, “Great even, but that’s not why I need the time off. And, by the way, love that tie today. Is it new?”

Oliver glanced down at the green and gold tie he was wearing and frowned at her, “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me, why would anything be wrong with me?”

“Because all of the sudden you’re acting weird and you want to take time off so if it’s not about Isabel then what is it?”

“It’s personal,” Felicity said growing frustrated, “as in ‘personal days’.”

“No.” Oliver said simply before sitting down in his chair.

“No?” Felicity repeated.

“No,” Oliver replied easily, “as in N-O, no.”

“You’re telling me no?” She said flabbergasted. “Really?”

“Really,” he told her as he leaned back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head in a stretch. “You need to get past what happened between you and Isabel and cowboy up. Get right back on the horse, as it were.”

Did he just tell me to ‘cowboy up’? Felicity’s jaw dropped open and she gaped at him for a split second before her temper flared and she began to do a slow burn. “First off, I already told you that this has nothing to do with Isabel—“

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t believe me?” She sputtered.

“No.”

“No?”

“Are you going to spend the rest of the afternoon repeating everything I say or what?” Oliver asked, his blue eyes glinting with amusement at her discomfiture.

“Secondly,” she said, clenching her jaw and pointedly ignoring him, “I can take a personal day if I want to, I’m only asking you as a courtesy. In fact, I have a ton of personal days, holidays, and vacation days I could take because, guess what, I work for you practically 24/7 and I’ve earned it!”

“Actually, you work for Queen Consolidated between 40 to 60 hours a week and the rest of the time you work for the Arrow which, technically, isn’t part of QC and therefore doesn’t actually come with a benefits package.”

Felicity put her hands on her hips and gave him her dirtiest look. “Do you honestly think you’re
being amusing right now?”

He fixed her with a hard eye, all signs of amusement fading from his expression. “No, what I think is that I’ve had to listen to you complain about the fact that I took you out of IT and brought you in to be my EA for three years now and the first time we actually have a chance to launch a presentation for innovative software that you, yourself, had a hand in developing, you want to skip out on it; why is that? And don’t say ‘it’s personal’ and expect me not to ask questions.”

“Fine! I just…I…I have to…” she licked her lips and sighed, shifting her weight from one foot to another as she felt his heavy gaze upon her, “It’s…it’s hard to explain. I can’t talk about it.”

“Why not?” He asked with a scowl.

“I just can’t,” she bit out, flushing hotly. “Trust me when I say that it’s for a very good reason, okay?”

Oliver searched her face for a moment before his eyes widened and his expression cleared, “Oh! I see. Is it…um, you know, a—“ his eyes skittered away from her for a moment, “um, private kind of thing?”

“What?” She asked in confusion.

“You know,” he glanced down at the leather blotter on his desk. “An, um…well, like a private kind of medical appointment?”

“A what?” Felicity gaped at him, now feeling completely thrown for a loop.

“You know,” Oliver’s eyes met hers and she swore his cheeks flushed for a moment, “chocolate?”

“Oh, right! The gynecologist! Yeah!” Felicity nodded, finally catching on. “Uh-huh, that’s it exactly! I just didn’t want to tell you because, you know, female down there stuff is kind of—“

Oliver waved her off as he avoided eye contact again and looked decidedly uncomfortable, “Yeah, I—I have a sister, so, yeah. No need to go into details, I understand.”

“Oh good,” Felicity breathed a sigh of relief. “So that means I can have the personal time then?”

Oliver squirmed in his seat a little, “Look, I know how important this sort of stuff is and if it’s really something that needs to be taken care of right now then, sure. I mean, I get that we’ve been working nonstop for a while now and some things, y’know…” He cleared his throat, “Anyway, I get it, but if you could try to reschedule I could really use your help tomorrow.”

“Oliver, I—“ She began.

Oliver stopped her by getting up from behind his desk and clasping her hand in his own then looking deep into her eyes. “Listen, the truth is that it’s taken a while and I’m finally beginning to feel like I have a handle on running this place, but I still need you. I’m hoping that if the Wayne deal goes through we might actually stabilize the company enough that we can make Stellmoor an offer and get rid of Isabel once and for all. I know you want that too, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” Felicity answered as she avoided his gaze suddenly feeling a bit guilty.

He placed his fingers under her chin to lift her eyes up to his and smiled. It was that soft gentle smile he seemed to reserve only for her that always made her knees go just a bit wobbly and she felt her resolve begin to crumble. “Look, I’m sorry for pushing you earlier. Of course you can go to your
appointment, don’t worry about it. I mean, you and I are a team and I’ll always want you beside me, especially on days like tomorrow, but the world won’t end because you took some time for yourself. This software is something you helped develop, it has your name on it, and I just wanted to be able to point to you and tell everyone how valuable you are, not just to QC, but to me personally. I couldn’t have done any of this without you, you know that, but your health comes first so if you need personal time then take as much as you want. I’ve got this, I promise.”

Well, crap, Felicity thought as her heart dropped to her stomach. I am so screwed. “I’ll, um, call my doctor and see if he can reschedule.”

“You don’t have to,” Oliver began to argue.

“No, no!” She waved him off. “It was just some blood work and an exam, routine stuff. I’ll just see if they can fit me in another day.”

“I’ll do you one better,” Oliver said as he moved around his desk to pick up the phone. “I’ll just call Thea and ask her to see if her doctor can fit you in this evening after work.”

“You don’t have to do that. Really, it’s not necessary,” Felicity blushed as she tried to talk him out of it. “Besides these kinds of appointments have to be made days, even weeks in advance. Her doctor will never be able to fit me in on such short notice.”

Oliver raised an arrogant brow in her direction as he dialed, “Billionaire, remember? Trust me, they’ll fit you in.”

“Fine,” Felicity said morosely. Great, on top of everything else, I just tricked myself into having to get a pap smear.

“Hey Thea,” he said as his sister picked up. “Yeah, listen, can you call your OB/GYN and see if they can fit Felicity in for an appointment this afternoon.” There was a sudden cacophony of noise on the other end of the line and Felicity had a sudden urge to beat her head against the wall. “No! Don’t be ridiculous! She’s just my friend, we’re not like that! Thea, you know Felicity and I—UST? What the hell is UST and what do you mean it’s all over the Lair? Damn it, Speedy—look, Felicity had an appointment tomorrow for her own doctor but we’ve got a conflict with work and I just didn’t want her to have to cancel and wait for another opening to pop up.” He paused as he listened to her, “I don’t know, whatever women usually need, I guess.” He placed his hand over the receiver, “It’s just a normal checkup, right?” She nodded painfully and he returned to his conversation. “She said it’s for the usual stuff, just a checkup. A what? Yeah, I guess so, whatever that is. Well, how the hell am I supposed to know—I’m a guy! Men don’t do all that stuff. Just tell them to do everything they usually do and bill me for it. Of course I am! She wouldn’t have to go there if I hadn’t asked her to cancel the appointment she had already set up, that’s why! Yes, I’m sure we’re just friends. Thea, just make the damn call! Okay, okay. Call me back when you find out. No, that’s okay, you can call me and I’ll just tell her. It’s not weird. No, it’s not. Why is it weird? We’re friends. Yes, friends talk about stuff like that! Don’t you talk to—So what if she’s a woman and I’m a man? What’s that got to do with anything? So? So what? It’s a doctor’s appointment, what difference does it make what kind of doctor it’s for? She makes appointments for me all the time! Yeah, I know she’s my EA but—Damn it! Fine, I’ll ask her!” He sighed and put his hand over the receiver again, “Is it weird that I’m asking my sister to make a doctor’s appointment for you?”

“Yes,” Felicity answered without hesitation. “In fact I’m pretty sure a goose just walked over Gloria in HR’s grave because of this conversation.”

He rolled his eyes and spoke to Thea again, “She said it’s weird. Yeah, well, whatever, just make the appointment and call me back. Fine! Call her back then, I don’t care; just make the damn phone call!
Fine, fine, I’m sorry! Thea, I said I was sorry. I am not in a mood; you’re just aggravating the crap out of me right now! Sexually what? I am not sexually frustrated! It’s a doctor’s appoint--! Damn it Thea, I am not getting into this with you! Believe it or not we actually do have work to do. Yeah, okay. Thanks Speedy, bye.” He looked over to Felicity who was holding her face in her hands and mumbling unintelligently under her breath. “What?”

She scrubbed her hands over her cheeks in an effort to relieve the sting of mortification which covered them and said, “You know, I think we may be getting just a little too comfortable around each other.”

“You think so?” he asks, offering her one of his rare but brilliant smiles.

“I really, really do.”

And thus I find myself on an examination table with my legs spread wide and staring at the ceiling. Why is it I always seem to find myself in this position whenever Bruce is coming? Felicity thought as she tried to get comfortable--which is never easy when you’re dressed in a paper gown with a stranger looking at your hoo-hah.

“Alright Miss Smoak, when was your last period?” The pretty Asian doctor asked as she tapped on her tablet.

“Um…” Felicity frowned as she searched her memory. “Huh. I can’t remember, maybe two months ago? I’ve always been irregular.”

“Are you sexually active?”

“No,” Felicity sighed. “Definitely not active at all.”

“No?” The doctor asked in a tone which implied that the answer Felicity gave didn’t seem all that credible.

“No,” she emphasized. “In fact you might want to check for cobwebs while you’re down there.”

“When exactly was the last time you had intercourse, Miss Smoak?”

“Trust me, I’m not pregnant.”

“Miss Smoak,” the doctor said in a low tone as she leaned in towards her. “I know that someone else arranged this visit, in fact they were very insistent that you were seen today after the clinic had closed, but you are my patient and this is a safe place.”

Oh God, please just kill me now. “I’m sure I am but, whatever you’re thinking, you’re wrong. Really, really wrong. 31 flavors of wrong,” she stated emphatically. ”No one is doing anything nefarious, I just haven’t been able to see a doctor in a while because of scheduling conflicts and my friends were trying to help. As for the pregnancy thing, I know I’m not pregnant because babies take nine months and the last time I had sex was more than four years ago.”

The doctor nodded, accepting her answer, and made a note of it on her tablet. “Okay. Are you on birth control?”

“I was but my prescription ran out and I never had time to go back to the doctor to have it renewed.”
“Yes, you mentioned that a few times,” The doctor frowned. “And when was your last appointment if I may ask?”

“Um, four years ago.” The doctor fixed her with a slightly disapproving look. “I was busy? Listen, I know it’s bad. I had just moved here all the way from Gotham and things kind of got crazy with work so I just never got around to it.” She turned slightly toward the nurse who had been patiently standing in the corner silently. “I gave your nurse the name of my doctor back home so they should have faxed over my records by now.”

The nurse nodded and indicated something on the tablet which the doctor quickly perused before speaking. “What kind of cancer did your mother have?”

“Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia; specifically she died from a secondary infection caused by a weakened immune system. It was fast; she died when I was four.”

“ALL can be.” She frowned, “Your mother was only twenty-three when she died?” She waited for Felicity’s nod. “That’s unusual. Did she have any sort of chromosomal disorder to put her at risk? Exposure to radiation perhaps?”

Felicity shook her head. “She had mild to moderate achromatosis due to Oculocutaneous albinism type IB but the doctors assured us that it probably had no bearing on the progression of the disease. My dad asked on my behalf because of my coloring to see if I had inherited an even milder form that accounted for my astigmatism but they said the likelihood of her passing that on were incredibly low. Her cancer was just luck of the draw.”

“I’ll note that on your chart. You indicated that there is no history of reproductive cancers that you know of on your mother’s side, what about your father’s?”

“Um,” She always hated answering this part, “I don’t know who my biological father is. As far as I know he was just a donor and my mother never discussed his medical history with my adopted dad. I doubt she even knew it to tell you the truth.”

It was always easier to say it was a donor rather than telling people that, when faced with a diagnosis of an acute form of leukemia at the age of 19 and told she would likely be left sterile from the treatments, Evie Smoak had seduced a man she’d met at a gallery showing with the sole intention of getting pregnant and never looked back. At least, that’s what she had told Lucius. Her father had emphasized the fact that, in Evie’s mind, it had been an act of love on her part, not selfishness, and Felicity had learned to pretend to accept it as such.

When Felicity turned eighteen, Lucius suggested they hire someone to track her biological father down. After she declined and he urged her to rethink her decision if only to get a complete medical history, Peggy Ann, the woman who had raised her mother and then helped raise her, took her aside and told her the truth: Evie had lied to Lucius when she told him that she never saw the man who had fathered her daughter again after their one night. The truth was that her biological father had known of her existence, had even sought them out once after her birth, but had not stayed. He met with Evie in private as Peggy Ann watched from a discreet distance, not revealing herself to either of them. He stayed just long enough to have a brief conversation and to hold her once, and then turned his back on them completely. Not even Lucius knew about that meeting or that her biological father was aware she existed. Peggy Ann had kept that secret for years knowing how much Lucius still loved her mother and recognized that if she revealed Evie’s deceptions, however well-intentioned they may have been, it would do nothing but cause unnecessary pain. Once Felicity knew the whole truth she didn’t have the heart to tell him either. Other than that one glimpse Peggy Ann had of the man, all she could overhear of their conversation was her mother calling him Henri,
that he appeared to be much older than Evie, and that he was vaguely European; possibly French or Irish, something lilting, but that she had been too far away to accurately place his accent. She also found one of his business cards later. He’d left it for Evie in case she ever needed financial assistance. Her mother had apparently thrown it away but Peggy retrieved it from the trash and kept it just in case.

All it said was ‘Henri Ducard’ and it had a number with a foreign exchange. She still had the card. She kept it in her wallet for a long time, trying to decide whether or not to track him down but, in the end, she decided against it. He was the one mystery she had never been tempted to solve. He knew where she was for the first several months of her life and he never came for her and frankly, she didn’t need anyone who didn’t need her. Lucius Fox was the only father she needed. Still, it had affected her. Lucius had always been mildly worried he’d wind up losing her despite the adoption and, even though he’d tried to hide that from her, she was left with some lingering issues. The idea of losing someone she cared about deeply bothered her. It caused her to cling to those close to her and isolate herself from the rest of the world.

Then, six months ago…

“I’ll go ahead and give you a breast exam, a pap smear, then draw some blood. We’ll also screen for STDs just in case.” She looked down at her tablet again. “Would you be interested in having me prescribe you some birth control today?”

She snapped out of her disturbing reverie, “I guess so.”

“Do you know what you want? I’m see you were on the pill but there are several types to choose from that also have low dose hormones that could help regulate your period or, if you like, can shorten the duration or amount of cycles you have. Although, as with any form of birth control, it’s important to always use a condom with any new or nonexclusive partners and to continue to use condoms with any current partners that have been screened for STDs for at least two weeks after beginning your prescription.”

“Trust me, that’s not happening any time soon. People keep telling me I have a type so I’m planning on avoiding Metropolis just in case they’re right.”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing, the pill is fine, whichever you think is best. Not having to deal with a period would be a bonus though.”

“Okay,” The doctor said brightly as she slipped on a pair of gloves. “Here we go!”

“Fun times,” Felicity muttered.

Felicity’s alarm went off and she slapped it into silence as she lay in her bed contemplating the watermark on the ceiling she’d been staring at for the past seven hours. This was happening, whether she liked it or not, and she couldn’t avoid it or hide herself away. The only thing she had going for her now was the fact that he didn’t know she knew he was coming.

Felicity’s mind began to churn as she quickly put together her battle plan. Today she was going to war with Bruce Wayne.
Chapter Six
Chapter Six

“Felicity do you have the…” Oliver’s voice trailed off as he stepped into the office and looked at his assistant.

“Do I look okay?” She asked, glancing down at her outfit. “It’s not too much is it?” She frowned. “I just wanted to make sure I looked my best today. United front, you know?”

“Ah, no—I mean yes!” Oliver said as he cleared his throat and regained his composure. “I mean, it’s good. You look…nice.”

I better, she thought, this outfit costs more than my rent. “Thanks. Everything’s on your desk,” she said as she sat back down.
After she had left the gynecologist’s office (which had been located in the most exclusive part of the city because rich people have hoo-hahs too) she decided to do some shopping. After working with two masked vigilantes, (nine if she counted Diggle, Sara, Roy, Barry, Barbara, Tim, and Dick. Ten if she counted Daniel but he was a sore subject with her so she was happy leaving it at nine) Felicity had learned that half the battle was choosing the right armor. She slipped into Neiman’s and bought a Herve Leger long sleeved bandage dress in lipstick red which she paired with a black jacket and a pair of simply styled but still very sleek black Christian Louboutins. The Manolo Blahnik’s she tried on were a lot more comfortable but she was going for red-soled stiletto devastation, not panda flats on a Wednesday.

The dress was just above the knee but still an acceptable length for the office and had a boatneck collar with a modest décolletage. The contemporary styled tailored jacket gave it just that little touch of professionalism that made everything work. The devastation factor didn’t come into play until you took the jacket off. The dress may have been designed to cover everything up but because it clung to every single curve it wasn’t hiding a damn thing. Thank God for John Diggle and his daily training sessions after Sara left because it was so tight you could almost see the dip of her belly button. You definitely had to have some ab training to pull it off.

She had eschewed her glasses for contacts, kept her hair down and over her shoulders, and her makeup simple. She traded in her normal bright lipstick for something shiny and sheer with a hint of red that didn’t compete with the color of her dress. She stopped and had her nails done in a simple and deceptively bare looking American manicure and the only jewelry she wore was the thin gold and diamond bangle bracelet Lucius had given her when she graduated from MIT, and the Boucheron gold and diamond Pivoine earrings that had belonged to her mother because she knew her dad would recognize them. Hopefully they would remind her to keep her head on straight.

The last thing left in her armory was her perfume; L’Air Du Temps. It was a sweet old fashioned floral perfume that was timeless and one that she had always loved but, more importantly, it would throw Bruce completely off his game. Alfred had once told her that it was the only scent Bruce’s mother ever wore and she was hoping he’d recognize it. The total effect she was going for was something she had decided to call ‘Sexy Demure’. She surreptitiously snuck a glance through the glass panel that separated her and Oliver’s desks and hid a grin as she saw him quickly look back down at the file he was reading.

Yeah, she thought to herself, nailed it.

An hour later she and Oliver had joined Isabel in the lobby along with Paolo, Isabel’s new EA. The other woman, who was dressed in head to toe Zac Posen, had taken one look at her, arched her eyebrow knowingly, but kept her remarks to herself. Just as well, Felicity thought, there is no way I’m fighting anyone in these shoes. They pinched her toes but her ass was poppin’ so it was worth it.

Lucius and the rest of his entourage came through the doors precisely at 10 am on the dot. The minute her dad saw her, his face lit up and he grinned from ear to ear. She smiled back but shook her head slightly and he gave her a little pout and a wink to let her know he understood then approached Oliver and Isabel with a handshake.

“Mr. Queen, Ms. Rochev, it’s very nice to meet you both. I’ve been very much looking forward to finally meeting you.” He said to them both in a tone that was both warm and professional.

“Thank you, sir. And please, call me Oliver.” Oliver grasped his hand firmly and returned his greeting with what Felicity secretly referred to as Smile #3: Professional yet casual with just a hint of teeth.

She could write a whole book on Oliver’s smiles alone and not in some Lisa Frank tweenager way.
Oliver was always so weird when he put on his ‘normal’ face that she really couldn’t believe no one else ever seemed to notice. She always had to curb the urge to either smack him in the back of the head and tell him to knock it off or laugh hysterically whenever he flashed one of those.

“I’m sure you’ve been looking forward to this visit for many reasons, sir,” Isabel said playfully before darting her eyes toward Felicity with a smug little grin.

Subtle, Felicity thought as she watched her dad’s eyes twinkle a bit at the opening she had just given him. That’s right Isabel; honor the letter of the law if not the spirit.

“No, now, Ms. Rochev, we mustn’t tell secrets out of class,” her dad said in a conspiratorial tone but slid his eyes over toward Felicity anyway.

“I’m sorry,” Oliver said in confusion as he picked up on the subtle byplay going on. “Do you know Ms. Smoak?”

“I should say he does!” Came the booming drawl from the doorway that Felicity instantly recognized as Bruce’s fake billionaire persona voice. It was even more annoying than Oliver’s fake billionaire playboy smiles #1 through #8. “She’s his daughter after all. Queen, Ms. Rochev,” he nodded toward them with barely a glance, his entire focus on Felicity. He approached her, his deep blue eyes glinting dangerously despite the wide grin on his face. Taking her hand he bent at the waist slightly and kissed her knuckles softly in a way that probably would have made any other girl swoon but just made Felicity want to give him a smack. She resisted snatching her hand back and giving him the satisfaction of thinking he’d rattled her. “Hello Felicity, nice dress.” He said with an appreciative sweep of his eyes.

“Bruce,” Felicity said in a cool tone. Anger was helping her manage her rambles, a fact for which she was extremely grateful even though the urge to try out some of the moves Diggle had taught her on Bruce’s face was almost overwhelming.

“Did he just say you were Mr. Fox’s daughter?” Oliver turned to her wearing a tense Smile #8 (tight wide lips, lots of gritted teeth that shouts ‘Lucy, joo got some s’plainin’ to do) Yeah, she’d once told Oliver her dad had abandoned her but what she failed to mention was that she meant her biological father. Her need to prove herself on her own merits had prevented her from mentioning who her adopted father was. Although she never thought Oliver would take advantage of her relationship with Lucius Fox, she also knew he might feel strange about it if he knew. She hadn’t wanted him to assume he’d gotten this meeting through their connection. Oliver was good at guilting himself into a corner that way.

“Oh well, cat’s out of the bag!” Her dad said triumphantly as he reached out to hug her and placed a kiss on her cheek. “Hello Baby, are they treating you well at QC or do I need to have a quick word with your boss over there?”

“Hi Daddy,” Felicity said returning his hug and smiling despite the fact that she knew Bruce had won this round and that Oliver would be using his own Loud Voice later. “I’m good.”

Lucius turned and fixed Oliver with a hard look. “You know Mr. Queen; my daughter hasn’t been home in almost three and a half years because she says she’s always working.”

“It’s Oliver, sir, and although I am sorry about that, I assure you Felicity is a valuable member of our team and a real asset to the company as a whole.” Oliver assured him (Smile #2, the sincere ‘I promise to respect you in the morning’ one) “In fact, some of the software we’re planning to show you in the presentation today was actually developed by the team led by Felicity when she worked for us in IT before we moved her up to the executive floor. I’m sure you know better than anyone
just how brilliant she is.” He glanced at her briefly and despite the hint of irritation she could see in his expression his eyes were warm and sincere. “I don’t consider her my EA as much as I do an equal member of our team and,” he turned to Isabel to enjoin her into the conversation with more than a hint of mischief creeping in, “I’m sure Ms. Rochev would agree with me wholeheartedly on that.”

The smile Isabel used was neither warm nor sincere but, then again, Felicity thought, even on a good day you could freeze ice on the woman’s ass. She was continually surprised Oliver’s dick didn’t fall off from frostbite the one time he managed to get into her panties. “Absolutely. I’d have to say that I, personally, have gotten so much from knowing your daughter, sir. In fact, just the other day Felicity and I had a good long chat about how much she was looking forward to your visit. Of course, she made me promise not to reveal her little secret to Oliver.” She batted her eyelashes her way, the sarcasm subtle but palatable to those in the know. “Your daughter is a stickler for maintaining a certain level of professionalism at all times.”

And score one for the Blyadischa. (because what’s the use of going all the way to Russia to rescue one of your best friend’s exes from a gulag if you don’t at least leave with a few new curse words under your belt?)

“Why thank you Ms. Rochev, I’d like to think my daughter got those particular skills from me.”

And an inadvertent burn for Dad! Felicity thought as she struggled to maintain her mask of cool professionalism as she tallied up her mental scoreboard.

“Shall we?” Lucius asked.

“Absolutely, right this way to the conference room,” Oliver indicated with a wave.

“Can I escort you, Mr. Wayne?” Isabel asked in a more than a little bit of a flirtatious manner.

Bruce, who had never taken his eyes off Felicity, finally turned to smile at the other woman. “You know what, Ms. Rochev—or can I just call you Isabel?”

“Of course, Bruce,” she practically purred at him.

“The thing is, Isabel, that Lucius is really the one who understands this sort of thing better than I do and it’s just been so long,” his eyes swept over Felicity’s figure once again in a knowing manner, “since I’ve spent time with Felicity that I was wondering if you’d mind if she showed me around a bit before we caught up with the rest of the group?”

Again Isabel’s eyebrows twitched upwards as she looked at her and, this time; there was a look of grudging admiration along with some other inscrutable flash of something inside her cold dark eyes. “Not a problem, Bruce. I’m sure Felicity would be happy to show you around.”

Great, she thought, then borrowing a page from The Oliver Queen Pretends to be a Normal Human Being playbook she turned to him with her best approximation of Smile #1: Bored at a Charity Function but Still Making a Grudging Effort at Pretending to Give a Shit. “Really though, it’s just an office building same as any other, Bruce. I’m sure if you’ve seen one you’ve seen them all and your time and mine would probably be best spent in the conference room.”

The dangerous flash in his eyes along with the tightening of his jaw as he attempted to maintain his looie goosie playbook grin told her he was beginning to lose patience with the lack of effect his presence seemed to be having on her. “Oh, but Felicity you and I have so much to talk about and I think I’d rather hear about this communications program from the woman who led the team rather
than have a bunch of salesman pitch it to me via PowerPoint. Besides, we have four years of
catching up to do.”

“You know, you do make a valid point, Bruce. You should get your information directly from the
source, as it were,” Felicity reached out and grabbed Isabel’s elbow, sidling up next to her and
patting her arm as though they were the best of friends. Isabel stiffened slightly but, to her credit, her
expression never wavered. “You know, I was just one member of the team that wrote the actual
program but Isabel was its driving force.” She cocked her head to the side and flashed Isabel her
most brilliant teeth grinding grin before looking back at Bruce. “I have to say that none of us here at
QC could do what we do without the leadership skills of this woman. She makes us strive for
innovation and excellence. If there’s anyone you should talk to about QC besides Oliver himself, it’s
her.” She turned to Isabel again, “You know, you should introduce him to Marvelle down in IT first,
Isabel. After all he’s been helping run the entire department for over a year now.”

A look that bordered on genuine gratitude made its way to Isabel’s face as she held her arm out to
Bruce, “What an excellent idea! If you’ll please follow me, Bruce, I’ll be happy to show you
around.”

Irritation flashed across Bruce’s expression for just the briefest of moments before he took her arm,
“Well, who am I to argue with two of the loveliest ladies in all of Starling City?”

Isabel giggled coquettishly and batted her eyelashes in what had become (in Felicity’s mind) her go
to move, then flicked her long hair back and did a half turn worthy of the catwalk, “Do let Oliver
know we’ll be with them shortly and don’t forget to pencil me in your calendar for lunch on
Monday.” She wagged a playful finger in her direction, “It’s my treat.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Have fun you two!” Felicity returned in the same sickeningly sweet
voice. Oh well, pissing Bruce off was almost worth the indigestion she’d suffer at having to eat a
meal with that woman on the off chance she was serious. Note to self: Stop by the pharmacy and
pick up a big bottle of those chewy antacids, the fruit flavored ones.

She turned on her heel and made sure to put a little extra pop in her bootie the $600 Christian
Louboutins were providing because, if she knew Bruce, he was still keeping an eye on her as she
made her way to the conference room. Yeah, enjoy the trailers you flying rodent costume-wearing
butthead, because there is no way you’re ever seeing this Feature Presentation ever again.

The PowerPoint was well under way and the lights were dimmed when Felicity quietly made her
way into the conference room and sat next to Oliver. He frowned and leaned in, “Where are Wayne
and Isabel?”

“Isabel is taking him down to IT.”

“Why?”

“Well,” she whispered with a mischievous half-grin, “Bruce wanted a quick tour of the building and
Isabel wanted to take him to all the frequently visited tourist traps she showed you in Russia.”

Oliver’s lips twitched upward of their own volition as he pretended to pay attention to the
presentation they had both already seen seven hundred times. “I thought we were sticking to ‘What
happens in Russia stays in Russia?’”

“Don’t look at me, it’s your ex playing Russian Embassy with the client, not me.”

Oliver rubbed his hand over his mouth and cleared his throat softly to cover up his chuckle at that.
“Ms. Smoak, you are being a very naughty girl today.”

“So spank me after the meeting,” she quipped softly then froze as her brain caught up with what had just popped out of her mouth.

Before she could utter a swift and rambling apology though, Oliver murmured back in a husky voice, “Keep dressing like that around the office and I just might.”

Hello. Her mouth fell open and her cheeks flushed as she looked at him. His lips twitched upwards in triumph and he said, “By the way, that’s a lovely perfume you’re wearing. Suits you.”

“Thanks,” she returned a bit breathlessly.

“Reminds me of whenever Raisa would give me a hug in the kitchen after a tough day when I was a kid,” his eyes slid towards her and his voice slipped into that dusky timbre once more. “You smell like my best memories of home.”

Felicity didn’t say a word after that because she didn’t trust herself to speak. Instead all she could think was, ‘Goodbye Perry Ellis 360, L’Air Du Temps has just become my signature fragrance.’

Near the end of the PowerPoint presentation Bruce and Isabel entered the room. From the corner of her eye Felicity watched as Bruce tried to make his way over to the empty seat next to her but Isabel headed him off and pulled him to her side instead. Apparently she wasn’t the only one to notice his intense scrutiny because she sensed, rather than saw, Oliver stiffen beside her. Knowing his territorial tendencies, she could just imagine what his face looked like right about now. What was it with masked avenger types and their absurd habit of showing their teeth whenever it looked like someone else was thinking of peeing on their tree? It was like they were all, ‘No, no! I can’t possibly love you or date you, but if anyone else looks at you or feels any kind of attraction for you, well, you’re mine…until, of course, they go away and then I’m planning on dropping you like a hot potato.’

Felicity nearly rolled her eyes at the both of them but then she paused as a thought popped into her head. The room was practically engulfed in darkness but she knew something about both these men that neither one of them knew about the other (although Bruce suspected). Both men did their best work under the cover of night and both had honed their senses to near-metahuman levels, night vision and hearing in particular. It was risky because Bruce was already ticked off at the Arrow but, hell, in for a penny in for a pound, right? Besides, if they wanted to get all caveman on her then she was going to get some of her own back for a change.

When Felicity had done her shopping at Neiman’s she had also stopped in for a looky-loo at La Perla. Under normal circumstances, Felicity was a cotton undies and 18 hour kind of girl who bought her pantyhose at Target the way the rest of the world did. That said, when she decided to go to war using the Barbara Gordon Method she didn’t skimp on the foundation, no sir. She sure as hell wasn’t planning on letting anyone get inside her cookie jar but just knowing she was packing some real heat was a necessary ego boost. She had left the pantyhose from the plastic egg in her top drawer and sprung for the real deal instead. That meant La Perla Black Label all the way: Balconette bra, thong, and garter belt in sheer nude and real silk stockings. Felicity was loaded for bear!

She reached under the table and laid a soft touch on Oliver’s thigh while simultaneously crossing her legs at the knee and allowing the silk stockings to slowly rub together on the way up making a barely audible but unmistakable sound. Casting her peripheral vision left and right she saw both men swallow and felt the muscles of Oliver’s thigh tense. Just as quickly as she touched his leg she removed her hand so that it seemed almost like an accident and made sure to keep her expression...
steady and composed. She then sighed and arched her back a bit as if getting a bit uncomfortable by being seated in the same position for so long. She slowly reached up with her hand and pulled her hair back on the side visible to Bruce and tucked it behind her ear, exposing the line of her neck to his penetrating gaze. Her girls stood high and up front due to the miracle known as underwire and she shifted again as she fanned herself slightly. “Are you hot?” She asked Oliver quietly with a bit of a frowny pout.

“Hmm?” Oliver hummed as he eyes twitched upwards from where they were staring.

“I think someone turned up the heat.”

“It is…kind of warm, yeah.”

Felicity sighed in feigned aggravation and began to shrug off the fitted jacket she was wearing. “Remind me to check the thermostat when the lights come back up.” Her body twisted first one way then the other so she could toss the jacket over the arms of the empty seat beside her giving Bruce a clear shot of exactly what it had been hiding. Through her eyelashes she watched as something dark and dangerous glinted in his eyes and it was all she could do not to flash a triumphant grin. And the IT Girl Wednesday scores again!

The presentation ended and the lights slowly came back up. Felicity pushed back her chair and walked towards the door behind where Bruce was sitting. She made sure not to look at him directly as she focused her gaze on the thermostat but she felt his stare right down to her bones. She made sure to walk at an unhurried pace, making her hair bounce and glow under the florescent lights as the scent of her perfume made its way to him. She heard his sharp inhale of breath as she lowered the room temperature to 68 degrees then quickly turned to make her way back to the front of the room giving Bruce a wide berth. Even in a room full of people she wouldn’t put it past him to try to latch onto her wrist to get under her skin and she wasn’t there to play his game, he was going to play hers.

Roger Pearson, the Head of Marketing, was wrapping up the initial presentation so Felicity made her way up to the podium to stand behind him and off to the side with her shoulders back and hands folded demurely in front of her so her arms were accidentally-on-purpose framing her breasts to their full advantage. Both Bruce and Oliver now stared at her with almost the exact same intensity carved into their expressions. She, on the other hand, was giving Roger her best Dallas Cowgirl Cheerleader smile as she clapped politely with the other attendees. Roger who was in his late fifties, bald, and had the beginnings of an impressive pot belly, looked at her like he was a puppy and she had just given him the best belly rub ever. Damn, she thought as he winked playfully at her, apparently this dress is a hit all over. When he stepped aside she moved to the podium and swept the entire room a sunny smile. “Ladies and gentlemen, I think now would be an excellent time to take a brief break. There are light snacks and refreshments in the next room. Let’s take 20 minutes to stretch our legs and mingle before we come back in for questions.”

Both Bruce and Oliver quickly stood and took a step in her direction but she faked them both out by turning toward her dad and sweeping his arm in her own instead. “Mind if I escort you, Daddy?”

“Not at all, in fact I insist on it,” he said laying his hand over hers as they made their way into the next room where an impressive spread of appetizers were laid out. “Have I told you, Baby, just how pretty you look today? That was your mother’s favorite color; she always did love seeing you in red.”

“I remember, Daddy,” Felicity said squeezing his hand affectionately.

“She never wore those earrings.”

“Are those her earrings?”
She nodded. “I wore them for luck because, well, this is the first time you’ve ever seen me doing my job and I really want you to be proud of me whatever else happens.” It wasn’t a complete lie; she really did feel that way. Besides, it was worth the glowing smile he gave her in return.

“I’m always proud of you, Baby, you know that,” Lucius said quietly but emphatically. “Come on, let’s save the business talk for the conference room. I want to introduce you to some folks on my team you haven’t met yet. After all, half the reason I came down here was to show off my little girl.”

Her dad kept a hand on her back or her arm the entire time as other members of Wayne Enterprises crowded around them leaving Oliver and Bruce no real openings to get to her. The few times that Bruce nearly managed it, Isabel made sure to cut him off at the pass with a predatory gleam in her eye and a lustful expression you could probably catch a glimpse of from the International Space Station. Oliver was the final winner though when, slick as you please, he managed to slide next to her opposite to where her father was standing and laid a gentle hand on her elbow.

“Mr. Fox, I believe we’re about ready to return to the conference room where Felicity and Sanjeev Preema, our Head of Applied Sciences, will probably be the ones answering most of your team’s questions,” he said smoothly.

“Well then, after you, Mr. Queen,” Lucius said with a regal nod. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Oliver escorted her all the way to the front of the room releasing her as the room filled back up then approached the podium to introduce Sanjeev and herself. Bruce was now looking at Oliver with murder in his eye and she briefly wondered if maybe this had been a bad idea. Yes, Oliver also needed to be taken down a peg or two because of the way he let his women complicate her life (not to mention the way he often irked her by being a total jackass), but she knew first hand that Bruce could get downright brutal when he put on that cowl and he was already itching for a fight. Honestly, if she had to choose which one of them would win in a no holds barred fight, as disloyal to Oliver as it may be, Bruce was the older and more experienced fighter. Of course, this was Oliver’s home turf so that might even the playing field.

Oliver was much more familiar with this city than Bruce was, he was younger, and (even though Oliver was heavily scared from previous injuries) he was more agile and lithe. He had an impressive musculature but where the Bat relied on power punches and kicks along the lines of Muay Thai, Judo and Kung Fu (among others too numerous to list), the fighting style the Arrow had developed was more along the lines of Jeet Kune Do, Wing Chun, and Kyudu. This made him more agile, less bulky, and better able to change his form to suit the fight at hand.

Felicity smoothed her hands over her stomach and centered herself. No sense borrowing trouble. Just because she was having a little fun with both of them didn’t mean they would get into an all-out battle over her. The very idea it could even get to that point was ridiculous. Bruce had her lock, stock, and barrel four years ago and he never even sent her a postcard and she’d been glued to Oliver’s side for the last three and a half years and he’d never so much as made a single gesture toward her in any way (the occasional look notwithstanding). The most Oliver had ever done is drop the occasional double entendre and that was just because he got a kick out of hearing her sputter and babble over it.

On second thought, she thought, I hope they do kick each other’s asses. Maybe she and Diggle would get to watch from the sidelines. Note to self: Along with antacids, pick up whoppers and microwave popcorn.

After all the questions were asked and answered and the Wayne Enterprise guests filed out to return to their hotel, Felicity’s luck finally ran out. On one side of her was Oliver, on the other was her dad, and in front of them stood a very perturbed looking Bruce with Isabel’s claws dug firmly in the arm
of his navy Armani suit.

“I insist that Oliver and I be allowed to take you both out to dinner tonight,” she cooed at him then turned to the elder black man. “Felicity will come as well and you can do some catching up.”

“That would be lovely but I’m afraid I’ve already made other plans tonight,” Lucius said as he turned to Felicity apologetically. “I don’t get to this end of the country very often and we have a few more stops we have to make before we leave tomorrow. We’re still on for brunch though, right Baby?”

“Of course, Daddy,” Felicity nodded with a soft smile.

He kissed her on the cheek and gave her hand another pat before turning and heading out. “Are you coming with me in the limo, Bruce?”

“No, I’ll just take a cab,” he said to the older man. “I wanted to catch up with Baby for a few minutes before I head out.”

Lucius waved without turning back and Oliver just shot him a perturbed look, “Baby?”

“Felicity’s nickname,” Bruce said smoothly as he focused all of his attention on Felicity again. “No one ever called her by her given name back in Gotham, isn’t that right, Baby?” He gave her that soft smoldering grin that used to turn her insides to jelly and said, “She was all big blue eyes and white-gold hair with just the sweetest smile you ever saw. All you had to do was take one look at her and you’d want nothing more than to put your arms around her and carry her away somewhere safe.”

Felicity didn’t even bat an eye. She was expecting this. “Actually Bruce, only the older generation ever really called me ‘Baby’. You know, like you and Dad.” She smiled sweetly and batted her eyelashes just a little.

“Yes, but when I called you ‘Baby’, you never called me ‘Daddy’ in return.” He paused with a wicked twinkle in his eye, “Well, except for that one time.”

She could feel the looks being sent her way and she ignored them. “Speaking of dads, Dick called me the other day and said he was getting serious about that girl he’s been seeing. Who knows? Pretty soon you might be a grandfather.” Bruce flinched. It was barely noticeable but it was enough that she could count it as payback for the ‘daddy’ remark.

“You have a son?” Isabel asked, feigning interest.

“Oh yes,” Felicity answered for him. “Bruce is quite the family man. He’s taken in several foster children over the years. He might not look like it but he’s actually quite paternal,” she smiled sweetly as the vein in his temple began to throb. “You could even say that Bruce is a kind of honorary uncle. His son Tim and I went to prep together and we spent hours just hanging out with his other son Dick and his girlfriend Barbara in the basement when we were kids. I’ve known the Wayne family since I was in diapers. Why, Bruce and his butler, Alfred, practically helped raise me. They even kept my coloring on their refrigerator, right Bruce?” She could almost hear the enamel of Bruce’s teeth crumbling as he gritted his teeth.

Oliver didn’t know what was going on but he could obviously feel the charge between them building in the air because he placed his hand on Felicity’s back and moved closer to her. It wasn’t intended to be an outward sign of possession, he was instead subtly signaling to her to curb her foot-in-mouth (even though Felicity was perfectly in control for once), but Bruce’s eyes darkened and tensed and the essence of the Bat came forth. “Since you and Mr. Fox have plans, I guess Felicity and I will have to say our goodbyes here then. She and I should be getting back to work.”
“No rush, Queen. However, if you have to get back to work, that’s fine. I hope you won’t mind doing me a solid and sparing Felicity for an hour or so, though.” Bruce smiled at her predatorily. “Every time I’ve tried getting some time in to speak to her it’s like someone’s been throwing up roadblocks.”

“Nonsense Oliver, work can wait. Lunch sounds like a splendid idea!” Isabel said as she held on to Bruce even tighter. Honestly, Felicity thought, it was like watching someone try to boat a marlin. “We should all go; you, me, Oliver, and Felicity! I know just the place. It’s one of the most exclusive restaurants in Starling City and I always keep a standing reservation.” Again with the eyelashes. “The oysters are sublime. I don’t suppose you get the quality of seafood we have here living in Gotham.”

Oysters. Subtle. Next she’ll be recommending the local rhino horn and Spanish fly.

Before Oliver could agree or disagree, Felicity took a side step closer causing his hand to slide across her waist until it was on her hip and she looped her arm around his in a more than casually friendly hug. “We would but this one,” she bumped her hip against his causing Oliver’s eyes to practically bug out, “has been promising me some time alone all week and I finally got him to agree to have lunch with his sister. You know,” she said conspiratorially to Isabel like they were besties and she hadn’t rung the bitch’s bell just two days previously, “you and Bruce should definitely go though! Trust me, the two of you have a lot in common. I’m sure you’ll find tons of interesting things to talk about.” She said smiling at Bruce.

“Perhaps dinner then?” Bruce said with an edge to his tone.

“Again, sorry, right Oliver?” She said turning to the now visibly angered Oliver. Oh, was she going to pay for this one later. Oh boy, oh boy.

“Right,” Oliver said tightly. “Felicity and I are having dinner with…friends, and then we’re planning on going to my club afterwards.”

“Tell you what,” Felicity said turning on her sunshine and rainbows persona to full effect, “you and Isabel should make a whole night of it since you seem to find yourself at such loose ends. If you like Isabel, I can let your assistant know and he can clear your calendar for the rest of the day,”

“That would be wonderful, thank you Felicity,” Isabel said, that same strange spark of energy lighting up her eyes again. “Why if you keep being this sweet to me I might just have to start calling you Baby myself.” She turned to Bruce who was none too happy at this unexpected winning volley. “Come along, Bruce. We’ll take my car and afterwards I’ll be happy to take you to your hotel.”

Yeah, Felicity thought, maybe she’ll even offer you turn down service.
Chapter Seven
Chapter Seven

As soon as Bruce and Isabel left the lobby Felicity disengaged from Oliver and headed to the conference room to gather her notes and her jacket. Oliver stormed in after her and locked the door behind him. “Okay, what the hell was all that?” He demanded.

She gave him a censuring look as she shrugged on her jacket. “People are going to hear you, can’t this wait until we’re upstairs?” What she didn’t add was, ‘so I can have time to gather my thoughts and make up something that sounds somewhat reasonable.’

“No,” he said as he walked to the door that connected to the reception area and locked it as well. “I want an explanation and I want it right now.”

Felicity propped one hip against the deep walnut conference table and hugged her waist with both arms, her long legs crossed at the ankles as she looked at him. It was the same stance she often took both at the office and in the Lair but, unbeknownst to her, in that dress with her hair flowing over her shoulders like molten sunshine and her big blue eyes free from the heavy frames she usually wore, she looked like the beginning of every fantasy he’d ever had. “What exactly do you want me to explain?”

“Oh, I have a whole list in mind,” Oliver said in a growl normally reserved for green leather as he advanced on her, stopping only when he was just a few inches away. “One: Why didn’t you tell me Lucius Fox was your father? Two: What the hell is with you and Bruce Wayne? Three: What have you got cooked up with Isabel? Four—”

“Wait,” she said holding up her hand in a ‘stop’ gesture, “there is nothing getting ‘cooked up’ between me and that woman—!”

“Four,” he growled, inching forward until she could feel his breath on her face, “Why are you so desperate to avoid Wayne that you felt the need to confirm every nasty insinuation Isabel has ever made about us by practically groping me out there, and why the hell did you wear that dress if you didn’t want him to notice you? And five: What the hell else about yourself haven’t you told me?”

Felicity’s cheeks turned as red as her dress, “Are you done?”
“Not even close!” He bit out, “But you can start by answering those questions first.”

Felicity jammed her finger into his rock hard chest as hard as she could. It probably hurt her finger more than it hurt him but it made her feel better damn it! “Well, in that case, I can answer all of your questions right now: I never told you because it’s none of your goddamned business!”

“Not my business?” He asked, taken aback. “This,” he tapped his finger against the table, “this is my business! And as long as you are involved in the parts of my life that you are involved in when we aren’t here, everything about you is my business!”

“Since when?” She demanded, the rising volume of her voice matching his own.

“Since day one! Since the first day I let you in!”

“You let me in?” She snorted. “I saved your life, you didn’t let me in!”

“Bullshit!” He shot back. “We’re a team, Felicity—a team! In order to trust you I have to know who you are! You know everything about my life, Diggle’s life! Why don’t we know anything about yours? After all, this isn’t the first time we’ve had to deal with sudden revelations when it comes to you, is it?”

Her face froze, “I told you six months ago that I didn’t know anything about that.”

“And at the time I believed you; now, I’m not so sure,” he said with a cruel edge.

Felicity flinched as she moved away from him, her face suffused with a mixture of anger, humiliation, and pain, “I didn’t and you know that! Believe it or not, I don’t care; my life is none of your goddamned business either way! It’s not like you haven’t sprung a few surprises on us over the years; Sara, Helena, your mother and her whole closet full of skeletons! I didn’t know because I never wanted to! It didn’t matter to me, okay? It’s not like you’re the poster child for resolving personal issues, is it? The only reason we know as much about you as we do is because it’s your mission to begin with and, whenever anything comes up related to the island, we have to practically drag it out of you or wait until it blows up in our faces. You know about Diggle’s life because you asked him. Not once—not once—have you ever expressed any interest in me as a person. You’ve never asked me any personal questions or even had a conversation with me that wasn’t related to the job at hand. I’m just a tool to you so don’t you dare stand there and act as though I’ve somehow betrayed you when you’ve screwed me over too many times to count and yet I’m still here fighting your goddamned battles!”

“When have I ever screwed you over?” He raged, “And don’t you dare throw the executive assistant thing back in my face! I’m sick and tired of hearing it! If working upstairs beside me is such a fucking chore then just quit, damn it!”

“Fine! I quit!” Felicity spat out, her eyes filling with hot tears as she stomped toward the locked door. “Keep your job, keep your mission, as far as I’m concerned you can just shove it all up your--!”

In less than two strides he was gripping her arm, spinning her around and before she even had time to speak he was kissing her. His arms wrapped around her as he pushed her into the wall so hard the breath was forced from her lungs.

One hand slid from her back up into her hair where he pulled her neck back so he could better control the angle while the other slid downward until he was squeezing her behind through the tighter than tight dress.

And then Felicity was kissing him back, her hands wrapped around his shoulders even as the tears
continued to course down her cheeks. He could taste them on his lips and his kisses grew softer though no less probing or intense. He pulled her higher onto his chest, lifting her feet off the ground, and walked her to the table where he sat her on the edge while moving between her thighs. As her legs fell open the hem began to ride up and he helped it along by rubbing his hands along her stocking covered thighs until her sheer nude panties and garter belt were visible.

He glanced down and his breath began to stutter. She knew there were reasons that they shouldn’t be doing this but fuck if she could think of any at the moment.

He pushed her jacket from her shoulders until it fell off her arms and onto the tabletop. There was a long zip at the back of the dress so he eased it down…down… down… pulling her long sleeves down her arms until her dress was bunched around her waist like a belt then released her mouth so that he could look at her unclothed state. Her pale pink nipples were clearly visible through the sheer fabric of lingerie that looked less like a bra and more like the beginnings of one finished off by something that was created either by God or the Devil. The look on his face told her that whoever it was who invented this brilliant piece of erotic architecture, someday she was going to shake their hand and say thank you.

“God, you are so…” he breathed before capturing her lips again and quickly removing his jacket as he toed off his shoes.

He had undone his belt, tie, and most of his shirt before Felicity’s brain began to come back online. At first it was just a buzzing in her head and then she began to hear the words her mind had been trying to tell her: You have been in almost this exact same position before and it did not end well, remember? “Wait, wait, wait!” She said as she used the last bit of her willpower to push him away from her and jump down off the desk, luckily without twisting her ankle in the very high heels that she had decided would probably spend the rest of their lives in the back of her closet about ten minutes after she had put them on.

Figures he’d leave the shoes, she thought fuzzily as she hauled up her top then pulled down her hemline. What is it with men and shoes?

“What’s wrong?” He asked dumbly as he stood watching her, his chest heaving as he fought to catch his breath.

Felicity pushed her hair out of her eyes and turned to look at him…which was a mistake. Woof, she thought as her eyes inadvertently traced the line of him through his mostly undone trousers. Apparently a fondness for leaping from rooftops and hunting down evildoers wasn’t the only thing he and Bruce had in common. “Uh…oh wow, you are really, really…wow.”

He stepped forward and cupped her cheek in his hand then pulled her in for another deep kiss. He ran his hand down her bare back and eased her closer until she could feel him hard against her stomach. Her brain went fuzzy again. She was just doing something, what was it again? Something about…? Oh fuck, that feels nice. He cupped her breast in his palm through her dress as the other slipped inside the still unzipped back to caress her bare skin. He began kissing a line down her neck as his thumb stroked the hard peak. When he got to the junction between her neck and shoulder he licked her and she made a noise that was something between a moan and a chirp. She would have been embarrassed but then he chuckled and started to nip and suck his way back up until he was sucking and nibbling on her earlobe, his teeth clicking against her earring, and she was just gone.

“Oh God,” She clutched him to her and pulled his mouth from her body and back to her lips. Her hand slipped inside of his open shirt and her fingers began to touch the angles and planes of him. His lips left hers after a deep, probing kiss to caress her throat.
“That feels…oh, that feels really good. That’s…that’s nice. Oh please do that…uh huh. You’re very good at this. Excellent. Gold stars all around,” she began to mumble as his mouth found her earlobe again and he chuckled low and sexy between nibbles and sucks. “Yeah, yeah. Oooh yeah. This is okay, this is good. We can keep doing this. It’s fine.”

He picked her up and placed her back on the table. He kissed her, gently working down the front of her dress so he could expose her bra then paid homage to the hardened peaks of her breasts through the sheer material. As his teeth nipped at her, she gasped, her fingers sinking into his hair as she clutched at him. One of her bra straps fell off her shoulder and he helped it on its way, exposing one of her breasts fully to his gaze before cupping it in his hand then kissing her again, his tongue exploring her mouth as his thumb teased her until her head began to swim. His other hand left her bottom to slide up her silk covered thighs, nimbly unsnapping her garters. His hand left her breast to join its mate, sliding over her thighs and tugging her toward him.

“I want you,” he whispered against her ear as one hand slipped between their bodies to find the junction of her thighs. His fingers rubbed at her through the thin lace and she gasped. “You want me too,” he said. “You’re wet for me, I can feel you,” he breathed against her lips as he began to tug them down.

“Oooh…wait. Wait…okay. Okay.” She pulled away, a bit more reluctantly this time, leaving her hands on Oliver’s chest to help them maintain distance. “This—this—this,” she stuttered and took a deep breath. “This is a bad idea. We can’t do this, not here.” She got up off the table, a bit more carefully this time, her hands attempting to keep him at a safe distance.

She managed that for about two whole steps until he pushed her hands away and moved in until he was kissing her again. “Like I said, I want you,” he told her, his eyes dark with lust. “I don’t care where we do this as long as I get to be inside of you as soon as possible.” Her breath caught in her lungs as he pressed her close so she could feel just how serious he was. He licked her lips before going in for another teasing kiss. “My place is too far away, your place maybe? Or I can call ahead and get us a room somewhere close? We can be in a bed in less than five minutes if we leave now.” He whispered against her ear before tugging her earlobe in his mouth and making her knees wobble causing her to have to grip his arm or risk falling over. “Or we can just stay right where we are and satisfy a fantasy of mine where I’ve got you bent over the desk and calling out my name.”

She squeaked and shuddered as his tongue made a rasping sound against her ear, his warm breath tickling her, and suddenly a bed sounded like a really, really good idea. Then again, so did the desk thing. Basically it all sounded good right about then.

“I want to watch you fall apart underneath me,” he whispered in her ear. “I want to know how you taste.”

A really, really--- “Bad,” Felicity said letting go and taking a few steps back this time as a precaution. “You said this was a bad idea, that we could never do this.”

“When did I say that?” Oliver asked with a frown as he took a step towards her. “I never said that. We’ve never discussed anything about something happening between us, but maybe we should have because you are just so…” He looked up and down like he was a starving man and she was a ten-course feast sent from the gods. “Remarkable doesn’t even begin to cover it,” He added with a sexy smile as he reached for her again.

“No,” she frowned, avoiding his hands as he tried to pull her to him again. “You told me—oooh wait.” Realization dawned and it hit her in the face like a brick wall. “You weren’t talking about me, were you?” She laughed mirthlessly, a hitch in her voice as the tears began to flow once more. “I see.”
“Felicity?” He frowned as he took another step towards her, “What---?”

She pointed at him, her whole body trembling with emotion as she tried to control her breathing. “You said you couldn’t ever be with someone you cared about or ever could care about but that doesn’t apply to me, does it? I thought you were trying to tell me that you could see something happening between us and you were trying to—to—”

“Shit,” Oliver breathed as he ran his hand over his face. “Listen, that’s not what I meant--!”

“Wasn’t it?” Felicity sniffed as she tugged on her jacket.

He followed her around the room as she began to collect her things. “Look, when we were in Russia and I told you that I wasn’t thinking of this—I mean, I wasn’t thinking of you; not directly—crap!” He scrubbed his hands through his hair, “I meant that I wasn’t talking about us, I was talking about how it is with Laurel and me! You just misunderstood. I mean, I knew you had a crush on me but I didn’t think it would ever get to this point because I always thought of you as just a…um, well, a friend before and thinking of you in a sexual way was just wrong on so many levels and I…” he froze and a strange part of her brain watched in amusement as dawning horror spread over his features. She now knew what it looked like for everyone else when, no matter what she did, the wrong things just kept pouring out of her mouth. It was like he was possessed or something. “I swear to God that was not what I had intended to say.”

She turned abruptly on her heel and began moving towards the door. “No—no—no—Felicity, don’t, just give me a second, okay? Felicity, just let me get my thoughts together and we’ll—I’ll—wait!”

Ignoring him, she walked across the reception area where the caterers were cleaning up the remains of the spread from the meeting. The women stopped and stared at her in low whispers as she made her way to the ladies room and closed the door.

Oliver followed her, in long strides across the floor, his clothing still partially undone and disheveled. The whispers among the catering staff turned to giggles as they huddled together and watched him as he walked right into the ladies room and locked the door behind him.

As soon as he turned the deadbolt and stepped into the room he ran headlong into an older Mexican woman in a QC maintenance uniform who was wagging her finger at him and speaking in rapid fire Spanish.

“No puede estar en aquí!” She told him angrily. “Usted es un hombre malo! Voy a llamar a la seguridad en usted si usted no deja! Este es el baño de las mujeres! Pervert!”

“I’m sorry! ¡Lo siento! Yo sé que no debería estar aquí, sólo necesito hablar con mi amigo por un momento, por favor!” She let fly with even more rapid fire curses at him for violating the sanctity of the ladies so he carefully eased her cart toward the door and ducked his head to avoid her hands which were flapping a little too close for comfort. “Yo no soy un pervertido, señora, lo prometo! Sé que este es el baño de las mujeres, pero sólo voy a ser un momento. Lo siento mucho, señora! Un minuto! Yo sólo necesito uno minuto! ¡Gracias!” He said unlocking the door again and practically shoving the woman and her cleaning cart outside, before turning the lock again. He stepped into the room carefully and called out to Felicity. “Can we just talk, please? Before the cleaning lady calls security and I have to explain to the press why I was caught skulking around in a woman’s bathroom?”

“Go away!” She said from one of the stalls.
He approached, hearing her muffled sobs. “Open the door, Felicity. Please?”

He heard her blow her nose then the flushing of the toilet. The door opened and she shoved past him straight to the sinks without looking at him. As she turned on the faucets to wash her hands he stood behind her and tried to place his hands on her shoulders but she shrugged him off. “Felicity please, give me a chance to explain.”

Felicity got a paper towel and ran it under the water so she could wipe off the mascara that had ran and smeared on her cheeks. “There’s nothing to explain Oliver; I’m done. Now go away.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said stubbornly. ”You and I are going to fix this.”

She glanced at him as she finger combed her hair into some semblance of order. “Why, Oliver? Why do we need to fix anything?”

“Because before all this happened we were friends,” he said quietly. “I’ve lost too many friends to lose another now, especially just because of some stupid misunderstanding that happened because I put my foot in my mouth.”

She straightened her dress until she looked put together enough to risk going back to the office for her purse and briefcase then turned to him, suddenly feeling much calmer. “You know something I’ve learned after being a nervous babbler all my life? Sometimes when someone sticks their foot in their mouth it isn’t because they accidently told a lie, it’s because they accidently told the truth. Goodbye Oliver.” She tried to push past him but he put his hands on her arms to hold her firmly in place.

He sighed and looked down at her, his eyes awash in misery. “Where are you going?”

“Upstairs, so I can get my things and type up a resignation letter.”

“Fine,” he said as he released her. “You want to go upstairs then we’ll go upstairs.”

She walked past him and he took a second to shove his tie in his pocket, refasten his trousers, and button his shirt before following her across the main lobby to the elevators. He took his time because he knew she wasn’t going anywhere without him. The elevator to the executive floor required a keycard to access it and Felicity had left her purse and ID card upstairs.

They rode up to the top floor in silence, maintaining their distance, until entering his office. Immediately she sat down to her computer and began typing while he leaned heavily against the door and watched. She hit the print button and began gathering her things, shoving her personal tablet and other items into her briefcase and taking her purse from the bottom drawer. She then snatched the page she had printed from the printer, got up from her desk, and handed it to him as she shrugged the strap to her case higher onto her shoulder.

He kept his arms crossed over his chest, not making a move to take it from her. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Just take the letter, Oliver,” she told him.

“No.”

“Fine.” She sat it on her desk and made a move to the door. “I already emailed a copy to HR anyway.” He didn’t move, his large frame blocking the exit. “Get out of the way.”

“No.”
She closed her eyes in frustration, “I’m not doing this with you so just let me go.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” he said as he straightened and took a step towards her. “Not until we talk about this.”

“It won’t change what happened.” She said firmly. “I’m done and I want to leave.”

“I didn’t mean what I said,” he told her with a pained expression. “I know you didn’t know about him and about what happened on the island—”

She opened her mouth to speak and a pained sob escaped from between her lips instead.

He took a step forward to reach for her but she flinched back and his hands hung in the air as he shook his head, his mouth tightening into a pained grimace, “God, Felicity; I swear I didn’t mean it. I know you didn’t know and I’ve never held that against you, I promise. I don’t even know why I said it. I--”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said quickly, refusing to look him in the eye. “I just want to go home.”

“I can take you home,” he told her.

“No.”

“If you’re worried that I’ll try something, I won’t. I’ll just take you straight home, I won’t even touch you.” He dropped his gaze and shifted his feet, “Look, what happened downstairs…if I took advantage of the situation, I’m sorry.” He licked his lips and lifted his eyes which were flooded with pain. “I’m so sorry, Felicity. I don’t know what came over me. My only excuse is that—no, there is no excuse, but I can promise you it will never happen again. None of it; it’s done and we never even have to talk about it ever again.”

Hot tears began to sting her eyes and before she could help it they were streaming down her cheeks. “Goddamn it!” Felicity said in frustration as she wiped the moisture off her cheeks with her hand angrily.

“I’m sorry,” Oliver said as he took another step towards her, his hand outstretched as though to pull her closer to him but she backed away. “Felicity, I didn’t mean to upset you—”

“I’m not upset, you jackass! I’m pissed off!” She growled at him. “You get pissed off and you punch things, I get pissed off and I cry which really sucks because more than anything else right now I really, really just want to beat the crap out of something!”

Oliver backed up a step and put his hands to his sides and away from his body in a gesture of supplication. “You have every right to be angry and I get that, but you have to give me a chance to make this right. We’ve been friends for too long to—“

“But we’re not friends,” she broke in. “You said so yourself: You know nothing about me. Friends trust each other and you don’t trust me, Oliver. And frankly…” she looked at him, her face a mask of disappointment. “I don’t think I can trust you, not anymore, because while you, and the mission, and Diggle are all important to me…I just…I don’t think I was ever that important, not to you. Not as a friend. Not as anything.”

“Now that is just not true and you know it!”

“Really?” She asked with a watery smile. “Then answer me this: If I hadn’t stopped you and we…if we…finished--what would have happened after? What would we have been to each other tomorrow
when it was out of your system and we were staring at each other over room service? What then? Would it have been a one-time thing? Over and done in a weekend and business as usual on Monday? Would you have waited a couple of days to send me some flowers and a balloon that said ‘Let’s Just Be Pals’ for me to stick on my desk? What?”

“I don’t know!” He broke out. “How the hell am I supposed to answer that? I didn’t plan it, I didn’t expect this! How am I supposed to know what would have happened next when, frankly, I don’t even know what’s happening right now?! Goddamn it!” He growled deep in his throat, his eyes reminding her of a cornered animal as he ran two hands through his hair then scrubbed at his ever present stubble roughly. He pointed an accusing finger at her, “You—you confuse the shit out of me, you know that? You’ve got me so turned around in my head that I—“ His mouth clamped shut and he just stood there as he struggled to come up with the right words. “No one knows me, Felicity. No one knows me. You’re supposed to be one of the few people that do but right now—“ his voice dropped to a near whisper, “I never thought of you that way, not because you aren’t…” he sighed. “This is what I meant in Russia. I may not have been thinking of you, but this is what I meant. I can’t have you working here and in the Foundry and have this kind of relationship with you as well. I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Felicity nodded, her face clearing as she straightened her spine and took a deep breath. “That’s fine, and you’re right: Neither of us saw this coming and I can accept what you’re saying but…what happened, happened and—I’ve already done this, Oliver.” Her voice was husky from the yelling and the crying, but also strong and determined. “My reaction to it isn’t about you as much as it’s about me. I will never again be the girl who waits for someone else to decide whether or not she is worthy of their time or attention ever again. You wanted to know who I really am and this is me telling you now: I am not that girl, Oliver.” She said emphatically. “I would rather spend the rest of my life alone then give anyone the opportunity to make me that girl ever again.”

“When did I---? What are you talking about?” He asked, obviously confused.

She gave him a pitying look even as she realized that her words weren’t as much for his benefit as they were for her own. “I’m saying I’m someone who needs to learn to stop living her life around someone else’s schedule. I need to stop falling for the hero when the hero never falls for me and I won’t be a piece of office furniture that gets moved into the bedroom when you’re between women.”

“What women?” He asked in anger and exasperation.

“She’s my friend, Oliver! You put me in a really shitty position, do you realize that? Now I either have to lie to her and pretend nothing happened or I have to confess to someone I care about that—I—“ She felt herself choke up and he started toward her again but she held out her hand accusingly. “Do you even realize how sick and dirty I feel right now? I told you once that I didn’t have many friends, Oliver! You guys are it: You, Dig, Roy, and Sara—that’s it for me! That’s all I have! And now I might lose one of my friends, I hurt my friend, because you decided this was okay!”

“No one is getting hurt by what happened!” Oliver said stubbornly. “Sara and I aren’t together—“ She shook her head, not even wanting to hear it, “You two have something, I know you do. Don’t you think she might be hurt if she knew what just happened between us?”

“She’s my friend, Oliver! You put me in a really shitty position, do you realize that? Now I either have to lie to her and pretend nothing happened or I have to confess to someone I care about that—I—“ She felt herself choke up and he started toward her again but she held out her hand accusingly. “Do you even realize how sick and dirty I feel right now? I told you once that I didn’t have many friends, Oliver! You guys are it: You, Dig, Roy, and Sara—that’s it for me! That’s all I have! And now I might lose one of my friends, I hurt my friend, because you decided this was okay!”

“Sara…” His mouth tightened into a grim line and his voice dropped a few octaves, “Sara and I aren’t like that. Not anymore.”

“Bullshit!” Felicity snorted. “You and I both know that you had sex with her fairly recently and I’m not some cheap lay you can release your tensions on until your girlfriend blows back into town. Not
that kind of girl, sorry. I don’t play musical beds, Oliver.”

“I never said you were and I would never try to make you into that!”

“I can’t do this—“ she began.

“Felicity,” he came closer to her and glanced down at her hands but didn’t try to take them in his own. “My relationship with Sara is complicated and whatever we have is less about commitment and monogamy and more about stress relief. Sara has her partners and she doesn’t care what I do or who I do it with and vice versa. We tried to make it into more but there was just too much bad road between us. That said my relationship with her has nothing to do with what happened. I won’t lie and tell you that I don’t find you attractive or that what I felt downstairs wasn’t real, but it was a mistake; one that won’t ever be repeated, I swear. I know what kind of girl you are but I also know what kind of guy I am.”

“I think…I think it’s time for me to leave.” As soon as the words left her mouth, Felicity knew they were the truest words she had probably ever spoken.

“Fine, yeah,” Oliver heaved a sigh, stepping back. “Take the whole weekend, Diggle and I can handle it on our own.”

“No, not just the weekend.” Her eyes met his and she swallowed, a hollow feeling opened up inside her and the world seemed to swim in front of her. “I quit.”


“I quit,” she repeated firmly, closing her eyes as she heard her own voice saying the words she never thought she’d ever hear herself say. “Both jobs.”

He stared at her for a long moment before his expression grew dark. “Fine.” He moved away from the door, his tone cold and seemingly indifferent as though all emotion had left him. “There’s the door. Have a nice life.”

At that moment, as if on cue, the door swung open and Diggle stepped through. Oblivious to what was happening he grinned as soon as his eyes lit on Felicity. “Damn girl, you look good! I like that dress.” He clapped and rubbed his hands together, then looked from one to the other, “So what’s the plan for tonight? Are you going to meet with the Wayne people later or are we going straight to the club?” He paused when no one answered, taking in the tense scene before him. “Okay, what did I miss?”

“Nothing,” Felicity said bleakly as she stepped around them and walked through the door. “Bye John, I’ll see you later.”

His worried eyes followed her progress to the elevators before he turned to Oliver. “What’s wrong with her? What happened?”

“She quit.” Oliver said tersely as he headed into his office to grab his briefcase.

“What do you mean ‘she quit’?” He asked following him, his tone darkening with anger. “You’re not just going to let her leave like that, are you?’’

“Yep, just like that,” Oliver said as he switched off his monitor and swiftly walked past Diggle to the door.

“Oliver, you need to go after her! We need her!”
“Just drop it, Dig.”

“You and I both know that ain’t happening!”

“Dig!” Oliver growled in the voice he reserved when he was in the hood.

“Fine,” Diggle bit out, shooting him a dirty look as he joined him in the elevator and slapped his hand on the button to take them to the parking level. “But we will be talking about this later. In detail.”

Oliver didn’t say anything. He just looked straight ahead, his mind in turmoil and jaw clenched. He needed to forget it and move on. He’d managed before she came into his life and he’d manage now that she was gone.

“We need her, Oliver!”

They’d be just fine.
Chapter Eight

The first thing Felicity did when she got home was strip off that damn dress and the shoes and toss them as far back in her closet as she could. It had been a stupid idea to buy it in the first place. What had she been thinking? What was the point of it all. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! She shed the several hundred dollars’ worth of undergarments across her bedroom floor as she headed into the shower and scrubbed her skin until the hot water ran out then punished herself by remaining under the cold spray until it had soaked into her bones.

She toweled herself off then brushed her teeth until the taste of Oliver was replaced by toothpaste, dressed in her most comfortable pair of fuzzy fleece pajama pants and a cotton camisole top, then made her way to the kitchen. She opened her refrigerator and looked inside to find two kinds of mustard, an old chunk of moldy cheese that she promptly tossed in the garbage disposal, a jar of Claussen mini-pickles, and Diet Coke. She sighed and grabbed the stack of menus off the counter and glanced at the clock.

Holy crap, she thought. She hadn’t been home this early in…”Huh,” she said out loud. “Well, don’t
have to worry about that anymore now that I don’t have a job to go to.” As soon as the words left her mouth she felt the hot tears sting her eyes. “No, not doing this again,” Felicity muttered as she pushed off from the counter and began to punch in the number to Mr. Chow’s. “I wonder if I promise to give the delivery guy a big tip he could score me a couple of pints of Ben and Jerry’s?”

Before the phone could pick up on the other end there was a knock at the door. She placed the phone back on the hook with a sigh, walked across her living room, and stared at the closed door with trepidation. What if it was Oliver? The knock sounded again and she looked at the doorknob for a second before peering through the peephole. “Fuck,” she said under her breath. Today was not her day. With a deep sigh of defeat she unlocked the door and let it swing open without even bothering to speak to the person on the other side.

“Surprised to see you home at—” Bruce glanced at the clock on her wall as he stepped inside. “Three o’clock in the afternoon.”

“If it’s such a surprise then why were you knocking at my door in the first place?” She walked back over to her phone, picking up the menu she had set down, before watching him as he took stock of her tiny house. “Is Isabel in the car?”

“I left her back at the restaurant, told her I had a meeting to get to.”

“Good, because I’m not buying extra take-out for that woman.” She placed her order, ignoring him as best she could even though his presence seemed to fill the entire room.

Bruce listened in as she placed the very large order and cocked an eyebrow at her. “I assume this means you’re inviting me to stay because you ordered enough to feed us and about six other people.”

“I’m stress eating and I have no food in the fridge,” she said with a sigh as she reached for a bottle of red she had hidden away in the cabinet near the glasses.

“Stress eating, huh?” Bruce said, rocking back on his heels in a way that would have really irritated her had she not felt so emotionally numb. “What’s got you so stressed that you had to order half the menu?”

“Quit my job today. It was your fault—well, mostly your fault, so no, you’re not invited. No egg rolls for you. They’re all mine.” She held up the bottle of wine in her hand with the label facing outwards. “’96 Château Lafite Rothschild Pauillac.”

“Nice vintage,” he said as he sat down in one of the barstools and peered at her over the counter. “Hmm,” she agreed. “Expensive, too. It’s no ‘97 Romane Conti, but it’s good stuff. It was a gift from Oliver.” She popped the cork and poured a bit into a glass, frowned, then poured some more before taking a sip. “Mmm, good. This is mine, too. The whole thing.”

“That’s a little selfish, isn’t it?” He asked in an amused tone, his lips tilting up slightly at the corners.

“That’s me,” she sighed softly as she looked into the dark red wine in her glass. “Selfish, and stupid, and always getting in over my head. Running away.” She took another deep swallow of the wine and let it wash over her taste buds, giving herself a moment to enjoy the notes of currant and other bold flavors on her tongue. “Quitting.”

“Doesn’t sound like you,” Bruce said quietly.

“That’s because you don’t know me,” Felicity returned. She glanced up at him, “Don’t suppose you brought any ice cream with you?”
Bruce patted the pockets of his jacket and shrugged apologetically. “Sorry, must have left it in my other suit.”

“Don’t you know you’re never supposed to come empty handed to someone’s house for dinner?” She asked as she reached for the bottle again after she drained the glass.

“You told me I wasn’t invited,” he reminded her as his eyes flicked first to the glass she was holding and then to her face.

“You’re not, so why are you here?” She leaned against the door of her refrigerator. The cool of the stainless steel against her nearly bare back caused her arms to break out in goosebumps but her eyes never left his as she waited for him to answer. “And how did you know I was home? Are you staking out my place now, Bruce?”

“We got news that someone put a contract out on you,” Bruce said, his voice changing from casual to Bat at breakneck speed.

“So what?” She asked, taking another sip.

His eyebrows drew together and he gave her a look of utter outrage, “So what? Did you acquire a death wish in recent years?”

“Contract got canceled,” she said, purposefully avoiding his facetious aside knowing that it would open a whole can of worms she wasn’t eager to take on at that moment.

“Barbara told you.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yeah, some people like to use this thing called ‘technology’ to relay news that isn’t necessarily urgent enough to require hopping a jet,” she told him. “The contract got canceled; I’m alive, moving on. Why are you here anyway?”

“Why wouldn’t I be here?” He asked her. “I find out one of my people is in danger I want to know what’s going on.”

“I’m not one of your ‘people’, Bruce,” she snorted.

He ignored her, nodding at the wine glass again. “Red wine, Chinese food, and ice cream? Doesn’t exactly go together, does it?”

“Are you kidding? That’s what my people call a Jewish sundae, where have you been?”

“This happen a lot?” He asked, indicating the bottle. “Red wine alone in the middle of the afternoon?”

“Not usually but I might decide to start making a habit of it, who knows? I have to find something to fill my days now that I don’t have a job to go to.” Concern tinged with some other emotion flitted across his face and she quirked an eyebrow at him. “Two glasses and I’m an alcoholic already? Really?”

“Just asking,” he said, his gaze never wavering. “You’re the one determined pick up bad habits and not share.”

“Do you want a glass, Bruce?” She asked him as he moved to behind the counter to join her.

“Just a taste,” he said quietly. “I don’t need a glass of my own.”
“Do you want my glass?” She asked as she reached for it but before she could his arms surrounded her and his lips were on hers.

She relaxed into the moment, the wine having warmed her blood and loosened her senses. His kiss was soft, and familiar, and like the wine that he could probably taste on her tongue it was bold and deep and everything she remembered and more.

Before she could gather her wits to push him away he was already pulling back. He looked down at her, his expression revealing nothing, and he said, “Good wine.”

“Probably tasted better in the glass,” she retorted, reaching for it and taking another sip, partly to steady her nerves and partly to wash the taste of him away.

“I don’t know about that,” Bruce said quietly, his eyes alight with some tender emotion. He stepped back to give her some space, keeping his hands to himself. “Why’d you quit your job?”

Felicity put the glass down, suddenly no longer interested in finishing it. She stepped back a few feet, feeling the need to move, and said as she stared at her bare feet, “Told you why.”

“You did,” he agreed, leaning on the counter as she had done earlier as he loosened his tie, opening the first couple of buttons at his throat. It was a nice tie, nice suit. Blue, she thought muzzily. “I’m just still not clear on how it’s my fault. Did you and your boyfriend have a fight or something?”

“I love how you do that,” she said as she looked at him, her head tilted slightly to one side. “You can ask one deceptively simple question and get so much information in return.”

“So far I’m not getting any information,” he pointed out.

“Oliver’s not my boyfriend,” she said firmly. “Not my lover, not my boss,” she sighed, “not even my friend.”

He looked at her with those midnight blue eyes which could either burn your soul or melt your heart depending on the emotions behind them. “You still haven’t told me how it’s my fault.”

“You hurt me,” Felicity said simply.

Bruce winced and put his hands in his pockets as he dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry.”

Felicity sensed the power shift continued on. “You should have told me that four years ago.”

“I tried,” he said quietly.

“You should have tried harder,” she said firmly.

“I tried, you left.”

“Four years, same address.”

“I texted, left a few messages.”

“You mean the two texts you sent almost a week after we had sex? ‘Meeting BC 1 hour’? Yeah, saw those; I wasn’t sure if you were calling a team meeting or looking for another excuse to leave money on the nightstand.”

He shifted uncomfortably, his eyes skittering away from hers for a moment, “That’s a cheap shot.”
“Cheap shot from a cheap date; saved you almost fifty bucks by paying for my own ride.”

“You dyed your hair,” he observed, seeming to change the subject and yet, at the same time, not.

“Added low lights so I wouldn’t stand out so much,” Felicity fingered the half-dried mess that hung down her back and shoulders in waves.

“I liked the way you looked,” he said, his eyes caressing her features tenderly. “You shouldn’t have to hide yourself from anyone.”

Felicity chuckled hollowly and rubbed her hand over her eyes. They hurt, it felt like they were swollen and on fire from all the crying. “That’s all I’ve ever done so why stop now?”

“Why did you quit, Felicity?”

She almost asked ‘Which time,’ but she didn’t. “I just felt it was time to move on.”

“Why?” He asked in that hypnotic tone of his.

She took a steadying breath and met his gaze with one of her own, “Why are you here, Bruce?”

Silence.

She eyed him irritably. “I’m not playing any guessing games with you and you aren’t getting in my panties tonight so cut the crap and just tell me: why are you here?”

“I’m here for you,” he said, taking a step closer to her.

She snorted rudely and began to laugh. He watched her, his eyes growing darker. “Right. Okay. Thanks for that.” There was a knock at the door and she made her way toward it without bothering to speak to him or give him a second glance.

He followed her to the door. “I’ll pay for the food.”

She chuckled darkly, “Four years of waiting for closure and you want to make up for it by picking up the check for my take-out? That’s almost as classy as how you handled it last time. Thanks, but I got it—on both counts.” She grabbed her purse and opened the door for him. “You can go now,” she told him before turning to the man standing outside with her boxes of food.

He slipped out quietly, ignoring the look of apprehension on the face of the small statured Asian teenager as she paid him, and didn’t speak again until the boy hurried past. When she moved to close the door he held it open with his hand. She looked up at him and waited.

After a moment he said simply, “I’ll be back later. There are things we need to talk about.”

She didn’t acknowledge his statement; she just shut the door and locked it behind him.

She ate a few bites then shoved the rest in her nearly empty fridge. Chinese always tasted better the next day anyway, she told herself. Maybe now that I’m going to have all this free time on my hands I’ll start buying groceries again.

She walked across the room and sat down on her couch, tugging one of the big colorful throw pillows into her lap. Bruce wasn’t going away until he got what he came for, whatever that was. Part of her hoped that when she told him she quit QC he’d drop it but something told her he was going to
confront Oliver next and he wasn’t going to be doing it as Bruce.

She buried her head in the pillow to muffle the sound as she screamed in frustration. Part of her just wanted to let the two of them deal with it while she threw her self-respect out the window and went to the bodega down the street to buy ice cream in her pajamas but that wasn’t going to happen.

The ‘let them duke it out amongst themselves’ thing, she clarified to her own brain. She was so very capable of leaving her house in her slippers and fuzzy lounge pants. In fact, when all this was said and done, she vowed to spend at least a month in nothing but pajamas as she caught up on almost three and a half years of sleep debt.

If Bruce confronted the Arrow as the Bat then there would be bloodshed—probably on both sides. Plus she would also be putting Diggle’s safety on the line. The Batman would attack first and deal with the consequences later and Oliver was fully prepared to kill if the situation called for it. Between the two of them—it did not bode well.

He would do it tonight, she reasoned. He came here as a precursor to his confrontation with the Arrow and then he’d come back here, probably in full armor, to let her know she’d been made redundant in that job as well. It was a very Bruce thing to do.

She looked at her TV that had actually gathered quite a bit of dust since she’d last turned it on and wondered what kinds of options she’d have in regards to daytime programming over the next month or so. Maybe she’d even take a quick nap on the couch or something? It had been awhile since she’d slept on her own couch and not the one in the Lair. She turned it on and tried to ignore the alarm bells in her head, tried not to acknowledge the fact that she was looking at the clock every five minutes, or that she kept tapping the arm of the couch nervously as she waited for it to get dark enough for the masks to take to the streets.

Not that she was going, she thought. They could handle it, right?

Finally, around seven, she walked to her bedroom to put on some clothes. She didn’t care if Mr. Ahuhmiebe saw her in her warm and fuzzies but there was no way she was standing between two armed to the teeth and pissed off vigilantes in her PJs because, while she appreciated the whimsical nature of her fluffy Monty Python Killer Bunny Slippers and pink and purple Dead Parrot pajamas, she didn’t feel like having to explain the joke while ducking arrows and batarangs.
Felicity dressed quickly in her most ragged and frayed jeans, a thin t-shirt she had bought at some vintage hippie shop with a silk screening of Lord Ganesha sitting on a lotus (she liked elephants and he looked kind of pretty with his big eyes and all the flowers on his crown), and a really lovely camel.
colored Donna Karan wrap around cashmere cardigan that reached her knees. She’d had it forever (and it looked it with some ratty bits of pilling here and there and the occasional pull in the weave) but it felt like a big soft hug and she was going for comfort, not style. Fuck style, she thought. I’m unemployed! I can be comfortable, damn it. Besides, she wasn’t going to risk getting blood on her good clothes just in case she miscalculated and had to help suture wounds and wrap bandages.

Tugging on a pair of pink Keds that she had splattered paint on the last time she redecorated her kitchen, she grabbed her bag and headed for the club.

Things were pretty hopping that night and the lines were fairly long already. She drove her mini around the back to the employee parking lot then opened the outer door that led down to the basement. It was quieter here; the noise of the club reduced to a throbbing boom as they’d built the Lair as far away from the action as they could. She tapped the entry code into the keypad and headed down the stairs to her computers and immediately began a surreptitious scan of all the security cameras and scanning equipment she had set up on the roof of the club and on the surrounding buildings and covered it up by running a few other programs in the foreground.

Over the last several months, every chance she got, she would set up the tiny wireless cameras and listening equipment all around them, getting as many angles as possible. Even Diggle had told her after one such foray into the surrounding abandoned warehouses that it was probably overkill but she believed in being prepared. If there’s one thing she’d learned from her time with Bruce (besides taking a minute to always stop and think before letting someone get their hands on the cookie jar, wink-wink, nudge-nudge), it was that you could never be too prepared or too paranoid. Hopefully, tonight, her paranoia would pay off.

In the background she could hear the steady metallic clack of the cold steel forged eskrima sticks and the occasional grunt of pain as Diggle and Oliver went at it. They were both so focused on their training that they hadn’t noticed her yet but she didn’t think that would last—

The room suddenly grew very quiet.

---long. “Damn, I’m good,” she muttered under her breath as she typed.

She felt his presence (a very tense and perturbed presence) behind her but didn’t look up until he spoke. “Felicity.”

“Oliver,” she said back, mocking his terse tone.

“What are you doing here?”

“Running some final checks on the system and making sure all the patches are in before I leave you guys to take care of yourselves,” she said casually.

“Diggle can do that,” he bit out as he moved to stand in her line of sight.

“Oh no, Diggle can’t do that,” the other man huffed as he put the sticks back in the weapons case. “Hey girl, nice to see you back.”

“Not back,” she called out, “just finishing up a few loose ends is all. Nice to see you too though.”

Oliver stared down at her unflinchingly and she pretended to ignore him as she expanded the reach of her scans and put on her headphones to listen for chatter off Bruce’s Oracle coms. They played this game for nearly ten minutes before Oliver grew impatient and snatched the headphones off her ears.
“We need to talk.”

“What about?” She asked as she slipped the headphones around her neck but close enough to her ears that she could still pick up faint chatter when and if he showed.

If looks could kill her dad would be brushing up on the Kaddish right about then.

“Now,” he bit out.

She turned off the monitor but kept her wireless headphones on as she followed him to a quiet corner of the room near the stairs to lean against the back of the couch. Diggle stayed on the other end of the training area, giving them distance, but she could see him watching them from the corner of his eye.

“Ayl mo-lay ra-chamim—” she recited under her breath.

“What was that,” Oliver asked sharply, pinning her with his penetrating stare.

“Nothing—Kaddish. It’s a Jewish—never mind,” she took a deep breath, exhaled to center herself, and faced him. “So, is this your way of escorting me to the door so you can kick me out of the club house? Because, just so you know, I was planning on leaving as soon as my scans and updates were done anyway.”

“I’m not kicking you out,” he said quietly so Diggle couldn’t hear him but his jaw was still clenched and there was a vein throbbing in his temple. “You’re the one who quit, remember? I didn’t kick you out of anything.”

“I remember,” she agreed.

“So why are you here?” He asked as he folded his arms over his bare chest.

It was still a nice chest, Felicity thought to herself as she tried to come up with a strategy. “I told you: running scans and—“

“Patches,” he finished for her and briefly glanced down at the floor before meeting her gaze again. “And like I said, one of us could have figured that out. So, I repeat, why are you here?”

“To kiss and make up so I can complete my life’s dream of having your baby and becoming the happiest girl in the world,” Felicity said in a deadpan. “Why else would I be dressed so drop-dead sexy in a basement at this time of night?”

His eyes ran over her figure before meeting her gaze again. “Nice sweater and…elephant man.”

“Style and comfort,” she agreed.

“I liked the other outfit better,” he said, the anger in his eyes making way to some other dark emotion.

“I kind of got that impression,” Felicity joked feebly as she shifted her weight a bit.

“So,” Oliver said, his lips twitching upwards a bit.

“So,” she echoed.

“You want to get busy with making that baby now or should we start with the kissing and making up? I’m good with either/or so, if you’re game, I can ask Diggle to step outside for a few minutes to give us some privacy.” He said cocking his head toward Diggle.
“Only a few minutes?” She said in mock sympathy. “Oh wow, that explains so much about your love life.”

“Maybe I just haven’t met the right girl yet.” He said as he took a half step forward.

“Still haven’t,” she said quietly, the humor dropping from her tone.

“Fair enough,” he said, his eyes dropping to the floor once again. He took a second before looking back up at her, his face open and vulnerable. “How about the making up part without the kissing and babies then?”

“I’m not mad at you, Oliver.”

“I’m not mad at you either,” he told her. “I was. I was pretty pissed off in fact—until about five minutes ago but I think that’s because you weren’t pulling too many punches earlier and …” he paused and swallowed, “And maybe you said some things I’ve needed to hear for a while now.”

“Just because it was the truth that doesn’t mean I had a right to hurt you like that,” she said, a lump forming in her throat. “I’m so sorry I hurt you, Oliver.”

“Come here,” he said gathering her into his chest and holding her close. She sniffled a little, breathing in the clean scent of his cologne mixed with his sweat and prayed she wasn’t dripping snot on his shoulder. “It’s okay. I’m sorry I hurt you, too,” He said, kissing her hair as she hugged him back. “Does this mean you’re coming back to work on Monday?”

She took a calming breath and stepped back. “No. I’m sorry but I think it’s for the best if I left QC.”

“What?” He asked in confusion, the frown returning to his face as he stepped back and dropped his hands to her shoulders. “Is it…is it because I brought up…?”

“No,” she said quickly, her cheeks flushing in remembrance. “I’ve had months to get past that and, like you told me in the hospital, it doesn’t matter who he was; I’m still me. He doesn’t get to have that power over me.”

“I meant it,” he told her sincerely. “You are Felicity Smoak, my friend, someone I care deeply for and who I….” He stopped and averted his eyes for a moment. “You aren’t him and you’re not responsible for anything he did. Believe me, if anyone is familiar with what you’ve been going through, it’s me.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I, um, I think it would still be best if I left. I think my continued presence at QC will cause more problems, more distractions, and I think it’s for the best that, for now at least, I take a step back,” she told him.

“I told you, we’re good,” he said squeezing her shoulders a bit in emphasis. “I need you with me, Felicity. On my side.”

“I’m on your side, Oliver,” she told him. “Always was, always will be—just not in the office. Someone’s going to talk, Isabel or someone else, about the conference room—“ She snorted abruptly and shook her head, ”’What am I saying? They’ve been talking and it’s affecting your credibility with the board and everyone else who wants to use your Dad’s death, and Walter’s leaving, not to mention your Mom’s…well, you know. It would serve a lot of people’s interests to create a power vacuum and it’s more than just Isabel looking for that kind of opportunity. She just happens to be the most overt of them. Plus…” she paused for a moment before soldiering on, “I think it’s time. There are things I need to figure out and being here…it’s not your fault, but I think that there are things I need to work through on my own.”
“You do realize that you just gave me the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ brush off?” Oliver said in disbelief then rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. “Wow, not used to being on this end of that conversation. Now I kind of understand where all those slaps came from.”

“Sucks, huh?” Felicity said with a watery smile.

“It really does,” he frowned in bewilderment. “I don’t like it.”

“I know.”

“No, I really don’t like it,” He said emphatically. ”I don’t want to let you go. Felicity, I—“

“Don’t,” she told him as she put her palm on his chest and held him slightly away from her. “Even if you think it’s what I want to hear; don’t say it.”

“Why not?” Oliver asked in a voice that made her want to shiver and go back to the whole plan he’d had about Diggle leaving the room.

“Because I’m not good for the team, Oliver,” she told him firmly.

“That’s not true at all.” He just placed his hand over hers and stroked it softly with his fingers, “You’re the one who made this a team. Before, me and Dig, we were barely functioning without you. You’re the one who pulled it together. You brought on the tech, came up with most of our procedures—you are the heart and soul of what we do.” He swallowed, his expression both pained and sincere. “I might have had the mission and the Arrow, Dig had his military background and Deadshot, but you gave us order and focus. You kept us in line and kicked our asses, called us on our shit, and showed us what we were capable of. You made it about more than just my mission, you made it our mission.”

She didn’t know whether to be flattered or vomit from the strain of having to hold back the truth from him. “I just can’t anymore. I’m sorry. Not—not now, anyway.”

Reluctantly, he pulled back and nodded. “Okay. I get it. After Tommy I had to take some time to get my head right, to confront some old demons, so I understand if you need to take a few months, but I won’t accept your resignation.” When she started to protest he held up his hand to stop her. “I’ll talk to HR and have you placed on personal leave for 60 days and, if you need more time, we’ll figure it out then.”

She wanted to protest, tell him there would be no looking back, but she’d hurt him enough for one day. Another lesson learned from Bruce: sometimes a kindly told lie was better than brutal honesty. “Thanks Oliver,” Felicity smiled, pushing down the pain. “I really appreciate it.”

Oliver, stepping back, added in a casual and offhand manner, “As for the team, take all the time you need but we both know you’ll be back.”

“Oh really, you think so?” Despite her inner turmoil, she found herself grinning at his display of arrogance. “And what makes you so sure about that?”

Oliver glanced down at his watch, “You quit, what, less than 4 hours ago and…” He grinned. “Come on, Dig! Let’s finish our workout before we go on patrol!” He called out turning on his heel as he jogged over to the workout mats, his step a bit lighter than it had been when she had first arrived.

“Coming!” Dig called after him as he put down the weights he was working with and waited until Oliver was setting up in the training area to wander over to her. “I don’t know what happened this
afternoon but I’m glad you and Oliver worked it out.” He told her quietly, a soft smile on his lips.

For such a big tough guy, John Diggle could be a real sweetheart. “Me too.”

“So, are you really quitting?”

She dropped her eyes, unable to look at him, “It’s complicated, Dig.”

“Always is,” he agreed, his expression telling her more than any words ever could that he understood even if he didn’t know the reason why. “I better get over there so I can hand him his ass whipping, but we’ll talk later, okay?”

She nodded and turned back to her monitors, “Have fun. Knock him on his butt a couple of times for me.”

“Will do,” he said giving her shoulder a pat before heading over to Oliver to begin their daily ritual of beating the crap out of one another.

For the next three hours she listened to them as they went through their training, keeping them in her periphery as she completed her own secret mission under the radar. Bruce and Barbara had always been meticulous about the encryption on their coms but Felicity helped design Watchtower and they still used her base software. She could get into their systems, of that she had no doubt, so why hadn’t she picked up any chatter yet? It just didn’t sit right with her. Bruce should have made his move by now and she didn’t trust his silence one bit.

A thought occurred to her that there may be a reason for that. Earlier he had known she was home even though….oh you son of a—

She palmed some equipment and shoved it in her cardigan pocket and called out to the guys then picked up her tablet. “Hey guys! I need to go out to my car for a second. I’ll be right back.”

“Do you need me to walk you out?” Dig asked, chest heaving as he took a second’s respite from the workout Oliver was giving him as they sparred.

“Naw, I’m parked right out back and I have my panic gear and tracker on me, see?” She held up her smart phone. “I’ll be okay.”

“Hurry back,” Oliver told her. “We’re going on patrol in 30 and, since you’re still here, I figured you might want to man coms before you leave us all by ourselves to molest the workstation in your absence.”

“Funny, like the threat of you messing with my computers—” she stopped and scowled, “You try it and I’ll let Diggle shoot you with your own arrows, Queen!”

They just laughed at her and went back to their sparring as she headed up the stairs and outside. She quickly crossed over to where she was parked and began her scan. Bruce was fond of planting bugs and tracking devices but he never used the run of the mill stuff. No, Mr. Pointy Ears and Paranoia always used shielded tech that most normal sweeps would—

BEEP

“Jackpot,” Felicity said out loud as she popped her trunk. She used the flash on her phone to locate the small tracker that had been inserted into the thick felt lining and piggybacked onto the signal. With a few keystrokes on her tablet she had the tracker thinking she was on her way home then she pocketed the tech, jumped in her car, and parked it under a metal awning near the old docking ramp
so the little red mini wouldn’t be readily visible to someone traveling above street level, then headed back inside.

She was a little mad at herself for not figuring it out earlier. Of course he put a tracker on her car, duh! Talk about a total face/palm moment. Bruce used trackers and bugs like Oliver used arrows.

She sat back down at her monitors and watched for movement on her security cameras. Less than ten minutes later a shadow in the shape of a cowl and cape flashed by. Okay, you smug pain in the rear…”Hey guys!” She called out as they were toweling off and gathering their equipment to go on patrol. “I’m such an idiot! I left my phone in my car and these patches are being a pain. Can you guys give me a few more minutes before you head out? Go, I don’t know,” she made a vague gesture with her hands, “hit each other with sticks for a few more minutes or something?”

“How much longer?” Oliver frowned, getting all growly. He always tensed up right before donning the hood and he hated anything that delayed his nightly prowl so she didn’t bother taking offence at his tone.

“Fifteen? Twenty tops,” she promised. A thunderous look passed over Oliver’s features so she cut him off before he could launch into a temper tantrum. He could run a multi-billion dollar corporation by day, hunt down baddies by night, but the man could still give a three year old a run for his money when it came to throwing a hissy fit. “Please? I just want to make sure you guys are safe and sound until I get back, okay?”

His face softened and she felt a little guilty for playing on his emotions like that but it had to be done. Oliver gave a long suffering sigh and scrubbed his hands through his hair. “Okay, but hurry up. Dig, want to take a few minutes to recheck the gear?”

Felicity turned off the monitors and headed for the doors. She took a few seconds to reprogram the keypad so they’d be trapped inside until she got back. It wouldn’t slow them down too much, a few minutes maybe, but she hoped their first instinct would be to wait for her return before they tried to override the system on their own. Neither of them was fond of doing that sort of thing and she couldn’t risk them running into Batman unawares. Hopefully she’d make it back before they tried but, just in case, she’d tell them she had intended to give them the new codes before they left out tonight and just got caught up in looking for her phone.

She quickly made it up the stairs and onto the roof where he was just standing there, cape whipping around him and his face obscured by shadows, as though he were waiting for her.

“You found my tracker,” he said in the Bat’s low rumble.

“You showed up at my place earlier, remember? Wasn’t hard to figure out,” she lied. Sort of lied. It really wasn’t that hard, at least, once it occurred to her but he didn’t need to know that.

“Why are you here, Felicity?” He growled.

“It’s a club,” she said lightly, “and I’m just in a clubbing kind of mood. You?”

She felt rather than saw his eyes rake over her form. “You’re not exactly dressed for the club scene.”

“Neither are you,” she pointed out. “And yet here you are.”

“You and Queen kiss and make up then?” His tone was cold.

“No,” she said, pretending confusion. “Why would you think that?”
“Because you’re standing on the roof of his club in the middle of the night,” he stated in a voice that was designed to turn her knees to jelly and not in a good way. “Where is he?”

“Not here,” she lied. “Since he took over Queen Consolidated he doesn’t come to the club that much. His sister runs it now.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Why’re you?” She shot back.

“I don’t have time to play games, Felicity,” he bit out. “I’m here for the Arrow.”

“What arrow?” she asked, feigning ignorance. “Why would Oliver have an arrow and what would you want with it?”

“Don’t play dumb, it doesn’t suit you,” he growled. “I know Oliver Queen is the Arrow.”

She looked at him and burst into laughter, grabbing her sides, “Oh my God! Are you serious? Oliver?” She snickered and wiped the imaginary tears from her eyes. “You think Oliver Queen is the Arrow?”

He was on her in less time than it took her to blink, his eyes cold and his mouth set in a grim line. “Stop playing games, Felicity, your life is at stake!” he growled. “Queen, where is he?”

“Probably at some party trying to talk a brunette out of her cocktail dress,” she shot back, not the least bit intimidated. After all, once you’ve seen a guy with his pants down around his knees it was hard to take the growly ‘I’m Batman’ thing seriously. “And, FYI, he’s not the Arrow. I can see why you’d think so but, truth is, despite the way he looks Oliver suffered some pretty extensive injuries on the island. More than 20% of his body is covered in scars and that doesn’t include all the bones he broke that never healed properly. He also has some disc issues in his thoracic spine—nonsurgical, but still. He works out but there is no way his body could handle the stress of leaping from roof top to roof top night after night. The man spends more time with his chiropractor than he does the board.” She gave him a wry half-grin, “Of course, if you’d ever seen his chiropractor you’d know why. The woman looks like Xena and wears an excessive amount of leather for someone whose job it is to provide medical treatment. He always comes back to the office sore but strangely happy. I’ve learned not to question it,” She added, just for the hell of it.

But Bruce wasn’t buying it. “Is he in the club now?”

“Pay the cover charge and find out for yourself.”

Bruce’s face got close to hers, his expression a mask of barely controlled anger, as he bit out, “What kind of supposed hero sends his girlfriend to engage the enemy while he hides like a coward? Is that the kind of man you have warming your bed now?”

“Okay, listen up, because I’m only saying this one more time and then I’m getting off this cold ass roof because this outfit was made for comfort, not for confronting pissed off anti-heroes in the middle of a cold snap!” She growled back, showing him she could do pissed off too. “Oliver Queen is not my boyfriend, lover, or even my boss anymore. He has never been my lover, boyfriend, convenient lay, or sex buddy in any way, shape, or form, and he is not now, nor has he ever, warmed anything in my house much less my bed and, before you ask, I haven’t warmed anything of his either. He made me his EA because Walter Steele suggested it to him. We were friends, just friends, at least I thought we were until he got a little too handsy in the conference room after everyone left,” she paused for effect, her voice gaining a touch of vulnerability, before putting the fire back in her tone.
“I guess he took that little show I put on for you earlier seriously. I wasn’t thinking and I should have. The whole point of his family wanting me there was so I could keep him in line. Oliver has always had a hard time separating business from pleasure and they knew I wouldn’t fall for his crap.” She eyed him in the way she would a particularly annoying cockroach. “So, now you know why I quit and why I said it was your fault, happy now? Ready to flap your wings and head back to the cave?”

He ignored the last bit but she could see his jaw tighten anyway. “If that’s true then why didn’t you just say that earlier?” He asked, waiting to see where she’d go with it.

“Why? So you could go all Bat because some asshole tried to reenact an episode of MadMen by chasing his assistant around a desk? I handled it fine by myself. Besides, my life is none of your business anymore.” Her phone buzzed a text in her pocket and she turned away from him as she glanced down at it. It was Diggle texting her.

//You okay?//

She typed back knowing Bruce was undoubtedly reading over her shoulder. //Yeah, be there soon.//

She glanced back over her shoulder at Bruce and waved her phone at him, “Look, it’s late and I’m cold. Plus, we’re obviously done here. I’ll call you if any contract killers show up to my door and ask me if I want to come out and play. Enjoy your flight back to Gotham.” She tucked the phone in her pocket and headed towards the doors leading to the stairs.

“You’re not going anywhere!” He ordered, cutting her off and stepping further into her personal space.

“You don’t own me!” She raged back. “I don’t take orders from you! This is not your city and I am not your tech anymore!” She felt her phone vibrate and she took it back out of her pocket only to have Bruce snatch it from her fingers and shut it off before tossing it away. “Son of a—” She looked over to where he had tossed it near the fire escape and turned a baleful eye on him. “I swear to God, if you broke my phone—!”

“Where is the Arrow?” He said in a dangerous undertone.

“Go home!” She yelled at him, her cheeks flushed both from her anger and the cold. “I don’t need you here! Just leave me the hell alone!”

“Yes, you do,” he said through gritted teeth. “You’re in over your head! You’re going to get yourself killed!”

“So what?” She asked him, her tone a biting mix of anger and sarcasm. “It’s my choice; mine! Not yours. Whether I choose to work for another mission, or decide to risk my life, or jump off of this building, it’s my business; not yours. You’ve done your bit, thanks for the info, and now if you don’t mind kindly fuck off.”

His eyes narrowed in anger and he pushed even further into her personal space. “Whether you like it or not you are still my responsibility,” he growled. “You wouldn’t be in this situation if not for me so that means I have to fix whatever mess you’ve gotten yourself into!”

“In case you’ve forgotten, I stopped working for you a long time ago!” She took a calming breath and gave him one last ‘go to hell’ look; “I’m done,” she said flatly. “Our business, whatever we shared, it was done a long time ago—four years ago—and this is my life now. You aren’t a part of it anymore.” She tightened her lips in anger, nostrils flaring as she stood up to him toe to toe. “Let me spell it out for you, Batman: Consider yourself off the hook. You’re forgiven for all trespasses and I
hereby relieve you of any and all responsibility you may feel towards me, even if that means I wind up getting sent home in a box! I neither want nor do I need your protection or your interference. You have no right to come barging back into my life like this. Go home and don’t ever come back again!”

She spat out then turned to march away.

He placed one gauntleted hand on her shoulder and spun her around, his face in hers as he gritted out, “Enough! You do not get to throw your life away, do you understand me? Now where is the Arrow?”

“Screw you!” She spat out as she tried to break his grip on her arm but he squeezed until she winced, gasping slightly, his expression as hard and unrelenting as the hold he had on her. “Fine! Do you really want to know who the Arrow is?”

“I know who he is, I just need you to tell me where he is!”

“You’re wrong!” She thundered back, eyes tearing up from the pressure of his grip. “And if you want to know where the Arrow is so damn badly then I’ll tell you!”

“Tell me then!” He roared.

“Well, I can tell you one thing: He’s not downstairs, you arrogant son of a bitch, because SHE’S being forced to deal with you as she freezes her ass off on this damn roof! Happy now?!”

The silence between them was almost palatable before he bit out, “The Arrow is a man. I’ve seen the surveillance tapes. There are witness statements—“

“Of a man in a hood,” she finished for him. “But which man? How many men? Have Oracle run through the tapes again then ask yourself how the Arrow can go from 6’1” to 6’3” back down to 6’1”, lose and gain as much as 20 lbs from one day to the next, and change the way he instinctively handles his weapon from Kyudo to Gun Fu. Then watch him fight and you’ll see that the Arrow’s fighting style and stance seems to shift along with his height and center of gravity. After you’ve done that then you can tell me it’s always the same man under the hood and his name is Oliver Queen. ”

She gritted her teeth, “Now get your fucking hands off of me!”

His hand left her shoulder abruptly and he stepped back, “I still don’t believe you.”

She rubbed her shoulder, the ache of the blood rushing back into the area almost more painful than the grip itself was. “Why? Because I’m a woman?” She asked him sarcastically. “How very caveman of you.”

“Because the Felicity I knew wasn’t capable of murder!”

She winced and suddenly the memories she’d tried to bury for the last six months came to the forefront. She took a moment to center herself before answering him. “It’s…complicated. Any deaths that occurred were in self-defense.” That was true at least. Anything else was none of his business.

“Well, while you’re trying to uncomplicate it, mind telling me why you’re on Oliver Queen’s roof if he isn’t the Arrow?”

“I said he wasn’t the Arrow, I never said he wasn’t involved,” Felicity said coolly.

“So he knows about it?”

“No, he just funds it,” she said, drawing her words out and challenging him with a dirty look. “After the Glades fell, Verdant was damaged and Oliver dumped the details of the rebuilding into my lap
because that’s what Executive Assistants are for; to assist the executive. I needed a new base of operations and, after the contractor I hired told me there was an unused basement that hadn’t been too badly compromised, I got an idea. Oliver never even bothered to look at any of the plans—hell, he didn’t even step foot on the property for six months after the attack—so I did some shuffling around and had the architect design a safe room/private gym space under the club. I told him that Oliver needed a secure area where he could hide out in case of another attack but, being a spoiled rich guy, he didn’t want to be bored if he had to be down there a while. He built it and I paid him extra to keep it off the filed plans because, hey, what’s the use of a safe room if people know where you keep it?”

His stance never wavered. “You expect me to just believe that?”

“Have Oracle track him down and he’ll confirm it. He’ll also tell you that I was in charge of the renovations. Then have her track Oliver’s travel history and you’ll see that he spent five months out of the country while the club was undergoing the overhaul and never came back at any point during that time period. Furthermore he had no cell service or computer access the entire time he was gone. Oh, and while she’s at it, have her look into Oliver’s personal accounts.” She flashed him a triumphant grin, “You’ll see that he transferred two million dollars into an off shore account used to buy weapons and gym equipment that were delivered to this address and installed in a, quote, ‘private gym space’ in the name of Joy Burns aka Felicity Smoak.”

“Assuming all of that checks out,” he rumbled under his cowl, “who’s the guy under the hood then, because it sure as hell isn’t a 5’5” blonde who weighs all of 110 pounds soaking wet?”

“Different men, all recruited by me to help protect the Glades,” she answered smoothly, not missing a beat.

“Murderers, you mean,” he said accusingly.

“Not murderers,” she shot back. “Men who are trained to return lethal attacks with equally lethal force. If we were murdering people left and right it would be one thing but we were defending this city. Any deaths were unfortunate but necessary. My men are mostly ex-military, cops, and former gang members who all have a vested interest in keeping this city safe but who don’t trust the system to make it happen and they aren’t used to pulling their punches. Whether it’s the military, the police academy, or the street the first thing you learn is that if a man fires his weapon at you, you empty your clip on him. There’s a reason the paper targets on the firing range have bull’s-eyes in the head and chest and not in the shoulder.”

He eyed her skeptically. “I see,” he said, his arms crossed over his impressively broad chest, “because recruiting mercs and gang members to play vigilante war games is something someone with your background does every day.”

“I worked for you, remember? Whether you wanted me to or not, I paid attention.” She lifted a superior eyebrow at him. “Right about now I suspect Oracle is whispering in your ear that every single thing I’ve told you checks out. She’s also probably figured out that the other money I diverted into the off shore account went to a man named John Diggle.” She had already planned this part out although she had hoped to avoid dragging Dig into it with her. Hopefully the other man would forgive her but she knew he’d rather she risk exposing him than Oliver. “Friend of a friend of mine, ex-Army Ranger Special Forces. All of this started when he asked me to look into a contract killer by the name of Floyd Lawton, codename Deadshot.”

His gaze sharpened and he seemed to zero in on her words, “I’m familiar with his work. What did this man Diggle want with him?”
“His brother was in private security and got shot on the job. Deadshot was at the other end of the bullet.”

“Deadshot doesn’t miss,” Batman growled.

“No, he does not,” Felicity confirmed. “His brother was the target although we haven’t worked it all out yet. All we could find was a dead end leading to a group calling themselves H.I.V.E. Dig was getting nowhere through official channels so I did him a solid and started looking. We still haven’t figured out Andrew Diggle’s connection but I followed the trail Deadshot left behind to some pretty powerful names. After investigating every lead we uncovered, among other things, a plot to destroy the Glades. You might have heard about it on the news a while back.”

“So this ‘Diggle’ is the Arrow and he just happens to be Queen’s bodyman?”

She knew then that Barbara was definitely on coms but was still giving her wiggle room with her story. “No coincidence to it. We needed him positioned where he could do the most good and that happened to be next to Oliver Queen. He’s my inside man, but no, still not the Arrow. Not exclusively,” she had to give him something and she had a hunch he’d go easier on a former military hero seeking vengeance for his family than a man he assumed was playing vigilante between Victoria’s Secret models. “Diggle is my second in command; I recruit and he trains our team, but ultimately he and every one of the men we use answer to me.”

“You expect me to believe that?” He challenged.

“You don’t have to take my word for it; have Oracle run it through Watchtower and then she’ll tell you whether I’m lying or not,” she reminded him.

A shadow of uncertainty crept into Bruce’s eyes, “Then who are the other ‘Arrow’s’ in that so-called team of yours?”

She snorted, crossing her arms over her chest, “No, there is no way I’m giving you any of their names. My men protect this city and I protect their anonymity. The Arrow operates like a deep cover terrorist cell; a few of the men work in teams but no one knows who’s who except me and only a few key players know who I am. Diggle is the face of our team so the men know him but they only know me by my codename. I do everything via computer and phone, all untraceable. The men even train in masks so not even Dig knows their names or faces. Diggle did three tours in Afghanistan specializing in hunting down and infiltrating terrorist cells so that was a deliberate choice on our part. If he’s captured, interrogated, or tortured he can’t reveal anything because he doesn’t know anything. You could stake Starling City out for months and, if you’re lucky, you might find one, maybe two names, but you’ll never find them all.” She took a breath, “However, in the spirit of friendship and to get you the hell out of my city sooner rather than later, I will give you the name of one of my contacts. He’s not the Arrow either but it should convince you, once and for all, that I’m telling the truth.”

“What’s the name?” Bruce growled.

“Detective Quentin Lance, SCPD” she told him calmly. “He’s my in with the police. Have a conversation with him about ‘our mutual friend’; that’s my codename. If he resists, which he will, drop my name. He’ll tell you that when the police have a problem they aren’t prepared to deal with he finds me and me alone.”

She could see his expression change as Barbara talked in his ear. She could practically hear her as she communicated the information she was recovering in real time: How Lance had investigated Oliver as the Arrow and came up empty only to turn his attention to Felicity, how he had put her
name in the Arrow’s file as a person of interest after clearing Queen then deleted it along with any and all other records mentioning her name. Barbara would be able to do the back trace easily enough however since she made sure to replace it herself days ago knowing she’d need to leave a trail of breadcrumbs for her to follow. Next she’d read to Bruce from Lance’s IA file and relay to him how he’d been demoted then jailed on the suspicion that the Arrow had recruited him before getting his shield back in the wake of the Blood Army incident two years ago and that he had placed several calls from his personal phone to a cell she could trace to one of Felicity’s aliases, Joy Burns. She’d uncover CCTV footage of her and Lance speaking to one another in various locations as well. Felicity had even added in some video footage with clear audio showing Lance talking to her about the Arrow and setting up meets and drops for ‘our mutual friend’.

If it went far enough that he actually got in touch with Lance then hopefully he’d stick with the plan. Lance knew of her contingencies. He didn’t like them, but six months ago they came to an understanding and she knew he’d follow through. He owed her and he paid his debts, even if it meant throwing her under the bus at her request.

Suddenly Bruce’s face darkened and Felicity realized belatedly that Barbara might have been a bit too thorough with her search and uncovered the fact that Lance had recruited her to assist in an unsanctioned op to capture a serial killer and that it had nearly cost Felicity her life, because, in a flash, Batman went from ice cold furor to burning rage. He reached out and grabbed her shoulders, shaking her roughly, “Are you insane? Do you realize that you’re already in way over your head? That you’re going to get yourself killed?!” He roared in her face.

There was a noise, a rush of wind and the twang of a taut bow string snapping into place, and then an arrow lodged in the smoke stack behind them, the fletching still vibrating between them.

“Get away from her!” An unnaturally deep voice roared and they both separated as a figure in a green hood stood near the roof access, his bow cocked and pointed toward the man in the cowl and cape.
Chapter Ten

“What’s taking her so long?” Diggle muttered to himself, “How many places can her phone be? That damn car of hers is so small it could be mistaken for a wind-up toy.”

Oliver glanced over to him, his eyes reflecting his growing concern. “Call or text her, maybe the ringer will help her locate her phone.”

Diggle nodded, tapping a quick message then heaved a small sigh of relief. “She found it. Says she’s on her way back but that she needs another minute. Probably needs to make a pit stop.”

“The ‘tiny bladder’ thing?” Oliver chuckled, reciting the frequently used excuse.

“Yeah, like it isn’t because of the 19 cups of coffee that she drinks a day, right?” Diggle joined in. “Well, if she’s on her way I say we head out and let her catch up on coms.”

“Sounds good,” Oliver agreed, already heading to the stairs. “Call and let her know.”

Diggle was already dialing but then stopped and frowned at the phone in consternation. “It’s going to voicemail.”

“What?” Oliver said, immediately going on alert as he turned to his partner.

“Oliver…” Diggle’s expression froze. Felicity was nothing if not jeopardy friendly.

Oliver acted; he bounded up the stairs to the keypad. “Try to get her on surveillance!” He barked, “I’m going out to her car–!” He punched in the code but an error message popped up. “What?” He said out loud as he punched the code in a second time only to get the same result.

“Oliver.” Diggle’s voice held a note of shock and his sudden pallor was enough to send Oliver’s heart in his throat.

Not bothering to take the stairs one at a time, he swung himself over the metal guardrail and bounded over to the other man who was staring at the monitors in disbelief.
“Is that---?” Diggle breathed, slapping on Felicity’s headphones so he could hear the audio.

“Can’t be, why would he come here?” Oliver said in confusion. “And why would Felicity be meeting him alone on the roof without telling us?”

Diggle spun in his chair and locked eyes with the other man. “Oliver, she knows him.”

“Put it through the speakers,” he ordered.

The two men watched as the imposing figure of the Batman reached out and grabbed her roughly, getting in her face.

“Enough games, Felicity! Where is the Arrow?”

“Son of a bitch!” Oliver growled, pulling open the small tool chest Felicity kept near her workstation. “We need to get that door open, now!”

“Screw you!” Both men tensed as she let out a small gasp of pain, “Fine! Do you really want to know who the Arrow is?”

“I know who he is, I just need you to tell me where he is!”

“You’re wrong! And if you want to know where the Arrow is so damn badly then I’ll tell you!”

“Why is she taunting this guy?” Diggle bit out in a mixture of concern, anger, and disbelief. “She’s going to get herself killed!”

“Tell me then!”

“Well, I can tell you one thing: He’s not downstairs, you arrogant son of a bitch, because SHE’S being forced to deal with you as she freezes her ass off on this damn roof! Happy now?!”

Both men froze, not even breathing. Oliver’s face paled as he realized just what Felicity had said.

Suddenly, Dig’s mind flashed back six months previously to a scene which still lived vividly in his nightmares.

It was raining that night; just pouring down hard and yet still hot and muggy. Hot rain, he remembered thinking. Hot rain that felt like blood pouring down his back; like God himself had been cut by those damn swords that were inches from her throat. It was late July and his clothes were sticking to his back from sweat, rain, and blood; so unlike the cold winter weather outside, but still somehow the same. All of them were down for the count; Roy was a bloody heap that barely even looked human anymore, Sara wasn’t moving, he was barely hanging on with two in the chest and one in the leg, and Oliver was screaming her name over and over again as she confronted the man they’d come to associate with Death Incarnate, alone.

“It’s my birthday,” she told him and his heart had stopped beating for a moment.

He remembered the slick metallic sound as his sword left the sheath, “I know.”

“Oh shit,” Diggle breathed.

Oliver snatched the tool kit off the table and ran to the keypad, practically tearing the cover off in his haste.

“Be careful!” Diggle called after him, eyes fixed on the scene playing out on the monitors. “Don’t
“I know!” Oliver snapped back. “Felicity has gone over this with me a hundred times! Let me know what’s happening while I override the controls!”

Diggle watched as the scene played out before him, turning up the volume so Oliver was kept in the loop as he desperately attempted to override the door lock. He watched as she stood up to a man who even the most hardened criminals feared without so much as a stutter in her voice. He glanced over at Oliver, at the stiffening of his spine as she rattled off one perfectly constructed lie after another, and he knew that the other man was thinking the same thing he was: Not only did Felicity know the Batman, but she had known this confrontation was coming for a while, long enough to plan her strategy so that the truths and lies meshed perfectly. Another thing both men realized was this:

Felicity Smoak, a woman both men valued for her intelligence as well as her integrity and courage, was a very, very good liar.

Diggle’s attention flew back to the monitors as he heard his name. He listened as she diverted the Bat’s attention from Oliver by using him as a shield and instantly forgave her for it. Her strategy, while incredibly dangerous, was smart. He listened as she named him as her co-conspirator yet still managed to protect and shield him by downplaying his involvement with the Arrow as much as possible. When she made it clear that the ultimate responsibility was hers alone and began to rattle off hard evidence Oliver began cursing loudly.

“Motherfucker!” He roared, slamming his fist into the door.

Dig rubbed his hand over his mouth and his heart felt like it skipped a beat, “Shit. You know what this means, right?”

“She set herself up to take the fall for all of it!” He snapped.

He didn’t say it but he could hear it plain as day in his body language, in the anguish reflected in his expression.

She was going to sacrifice herself for them. Again.

He hit the door again, the steel bending from the force of his punch, “Why can’t I get this goddamn door open?!”

“Let me try again from this end! Do you think this is why she really quit?” Dig asked as he began to search through her files to force the door to reset on his end. “That she’d been planning for this the whole time? This stuff must have taken her months! And Lance? Did he know about this? He told us he scrubbed the files but she seemed pretty sure he’d back all of that up.”

“I don’t know! I don’t know what to think anymore but as soon as I get this fucking door open I’m getting some answers!”

“But--!”

“Just open the fucking door, Dig! Now!” He shouted.

If he hadn’t known the truth, even he would have been convinced that she was the mastermind behind a network of Arrows with Oliver Queen being no more than an unsuspecting skirt-chasing dupe. He’d always known she was a smart but, after listening to her play the Batman, he realized she
was so far beyond anything he could have imagined. “Got it!” He shouted in triumph as the code reset.

Oliver was out the door the second it sprang open. “I’m going to the roof!”

“Oliver, wait!” Diggle tried to call out but the man was already rushing to the roof. He cocked his gun and chased after him, his senses vibrating with dread. He’d wanted to stop him, convince him to go in more stealthily, but it probably wouldn’t have done any good even if the other man had listened. Batman had laid hands on her and the Arrow was out for blood.

He got to the roof mere seconds after Oliver, just in time to watch as the Batman lunged toward Felicity and shook her shoulders roughly as he raged at her, “Are you insane?! Do you realize that you’re already in way over your head--that you’re going to get yourself killed?!”

In less time than it took to blink an eye, Oliver had notched his bow and let fly. The Batman released her, jumping back into a fighting stance as the arrow vibrated between them, and roared with a fury that Diggle had never seen from him before, “Get away from her!”

The Batman rounded on the Arrow and Felicity saw as his stance shifted, saw him palm a razor sharp throwing star to counter the arrow that Oliver had aimed at his lower face; the only exposed target under the cowl. Moving quickly before either man could shed blood, she stepped between them. “Stand down!” She commanded in a voice that would do a drill sergeant proud.

Oliver growled through the voice modulator, “Get out of the way! Now!”

“I told you to stand down!” Felicity snapped. Her eyes met Diggle’s, “Sergeant Diggle, control your man!”

He went with his gut. As soon as Felicity gave the order he flipped his Glock in his hand and came down on the back of Oliver’s head with the grip. Oliver crumpled to the ground before he could even register what had happened. He adjusted his grip on the gun, leaving it at his side as he stood at attention, his eyes never leaving the Batman as he addressed Felicity. “Do you require assistance, ma’am?”

“No,” Felicity said, her voice harsh as she struggled to keep her face free of any expression of concern for the crumpled figure in green leather. “Leave us and have someone see to your man’s injuries.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Diggle said, pulling Oliver up in a fireman’s carry, making sure to keep his face shielded from view.

“And Diggle?”

“Ma’am?” He turned to her, his demeanor calm and cool despite the fact that he knew there would be holy hell to pay later after Oliver came to.

“The Batman and I are not to be disturbed again no matter what,” Felicity said in a hard tone.

Images of watching her go into battle alone on another occasion came to mind and he remembered the sound Oliver made as she faced certain death in his place.

The words whispered in his mind again, words that still haunted him.
“It’s my birthday.”

“I know.”

“Are you certain, ma’am?” Diggle’s eyes met hers, the unspoken plea hanging in the air between them. She nodded her head slightly and, although it took everything he had, he nodded in response and walked away without sparing her so much as a second glance.

After the two men left, Felicity walked over to pick up her phone that was still amazingly intact if not scraped and scratched. She slipped it into her pocket them reached for Oliver’s bow that had fallen to the ground after Diggle knocked him out. He’d never forgive her for this, she thought absently. She tested the weight of it in her hand, taking a moment to admire the weapon and realizing she would probably never see it again after that night. She sighed and looked up at the Bat who stood as silent as a statue, watching her. “You win,” Felicity told him, gripping the bow with one hand. “Whatever you want. Do you want me to quit? Done. You want me to--”

“You’re coming home with me,” he told her in a voice that would brook no arguments.

“No.”

“Yes,” he said, his eyes flashing with fire.

“I have conditions.” She watched as he said nothing, his cowl obscuring his face in shadow. “You will not compromise Diggle’s cover, this is not optional. It’s mutually guaranteed destruction. I hold your secrets, you hold his, understood?”

“Go on,” he growled.

“You will leave Starling City as soon as possible and you will not interfere further with the Arrow’s mission. Again, not up for debate. This is not your city.”

“And if my business should happen to intersect with that of the Arrow?” He bit out, taking a step toward her, his displeasure evident.

“You go through me and me alone,” she told him in a way that would brook no arguments. “Diggle will take over and I will forgo any future role in the team, but I will make myself available as an intermediary between both your team and his should the need arise.” She spoke clearly and with purpose, her shoulders back and her features devoid of any sign of deception. She no longer had to lie, it was the truth. She knew Bruce well enough to know that if he decided to put Oliver on his list of enemies that he would hunt him down to the ends of the Earth. Bruce might not necessarily win, but his pursuit would take them away from the mission. “Again, this is not your city. The Bat stays in Gotham and the Arrow will remain in Starling.”

He took another step forward, looming over her as his teeth gnashed together. Whether it was because she’d told him he was not welcome in Starling City or that she implied that the Arrow might decide turnabout was fair play, she didn’t know. If she had to guess she’d say it was both.

“You’re leaving Starling City.” It was a statement, not a question.
“Not until I settle my affairs here first,” she told him as she leaned the bow against the access door.

“You’re coming back to Gotham with me. Tomorrow.”

She shook her head, “Not going to happen.”

He grabbed her arm, hauling her closer to him and tilted her head upwards with his other gauntlet encased hand so she was looking him in the eye. It was a gesture meant to establish power, not enflame passion. “This is not up for debate. You’re coming back with me to Gotham, end of story.”

“As what?” She snorted despite the fact that her arm was beginning to ache under his iron grip. “Your prisoner? Are you going to keep me in chains inside the Batcave?”

“If need be.”

She rolled her eyes at him, “Forget it, I’m not going anywhere with you.”

He tugged her closer, his fingers digging into her arm even further and causing her to clench her jaw as pain radiated throughout her entire arm up to her shoulder. It was all she could do not to cry out and fall to her knees. Bruce could bench press 1000 lbs; she’d seen him do it. She’d never believe in a million years he’d ever hurt her physically on purpose but he was emotional and out of control, two things that didn’t even belong in the same universe as the Bat. Right now she had to admit there was a distinct possibility she’d be arriving to Gotham with a cast on her arm if he squeezed any harder. There would be bruises tomorrow. “Not. Up. For. Debate.”

“And what gives you the right to decide that, hmm?” She asked him, her eyes flashing with contempt despite the pain. “I don’t belong to you!”

“Yes, you do!” He thundered back.

“Screw you!” She lifted her free hand to slap him and he caught it in his own, squeezing it with a punishing grip as well and causing her knees to wobble slightly. Every fiber of her being told her to back down and beg for him to let go but pure stubbornness overrode self-preservation. She bit down and redirected the pain into anger.

His head dipped toward her until their noses were nearly touching. “You accepted responsibility for the actions committed by the Arrow; that means that every murder he committed is on your head!”

“Then turn me in, goddamn you!” Felicity shot back, wrenching her wrist from his grip despite the pain it caused. She felt the skin of her arm catch and slice on the metal of his gauntlet as the material ripped. Her eyes watered and tears began to roll down her cheeks but she didn’t back away. “I would rather serve a murder sentence in Starling City for the rest of my life than live in Gotham under your thumb!”

Their harsh breath mingled in puffs of white fog as the temperature outside continued to drop. Her body was shaking from the cold and adrenaline but she meant every word. If she had to throw herself on her own sword and spend the rest of her life in prison, she’d do it. It wasn’t something she wanted or looked forward to but she had come to terms with the possibility of prison a long time ago. It was the reason--one reason--she had drawn a firm line with the Arrow in those early days. The last thing she wanted to do was get involved with another handsome man on a mission.

Danger, adrenaline, close quarters, shared secrets; they pushed boundaries, made people act on emotion instead of logic. Felicity had learned a long time ago that men shaped by fire and purpose had no room in their lives for personal relationships. They were built for pain and sacrifice; it was all
they knew, all they were. If you made the mistake of staying too long, getting too close, the fire that
drove them would consume you body and soul as well.

From the moment she suspected Oliver was the Arrow to the second he confirmed it; she swore she
would stay on the edges of the mission then get out with her heart and life intact. The problem was
that the line she’d drawn kept moving further and further away until she finally reached the point of
no return. Once that happened, and she committed herself to staying after they found Walter, she
started planning her own set of contingency protocols. At least a third of them led to her eventual
arrest and possible conviction for aiding and abetting the vigilante, but all of them were designed to
protect the rest of her team. Oliver and Diggle’s mission was the list and Starling City, hers was
keeping them free long enough to complete it even if the cost was her life or her freedom.

But not her heart or her self-respect; no one would ever have that piece of her again.

Not Oliver and not Bruce. They could take everything else, but not that.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Batman released the grip on her other arm and turned
away, moving silently to the edge of the roof. He pulled a grappling gun from his belt and launched
it toward the warehouse next door. “You have a week and then I’m coming to get you. And you will
be returning to Gotham.” He looked at her, his expression as hard as stone. “I’ll be keeping a close
eye on you, understood?” Before she could answer he was already racing across the nearby rooftops
and into the shadows.

She closed her eyes, her heart thumping painfully inside her chest. The cold air burned in her lungs
and she was so tired, so fucking tired. Every muscle in her body ached as though she’d run for miles
from holding herself ramrod straight. She could feel something cold on her arm and was fairly certain
the cuts and scrapes left by his gauntlet were probably pretty nasty but not deep. The damn thing was
made of Kevlar and specialized armor to maximize his grip while he was hanging from buildings and
steel cabling so skin didn’t stand a chance but the textured surface on the grip wasn’t deep or sharp.
She’d be in a world of hurt once the adrenaline wore off but she wouldn’t need stitches.

The fingers on her right hand were numb and practically useless from lack of blood circulation but
she managed to dig out some tissues from the pocket of her cardigan and stuff them into her sleeve to
prevent the blood from seeping through. She could still move her fingers even if she could barely feel
them so she didn’t think it was broken. She’d have to assess it herself later. She couldn’t show Dig or
Oliver she was hurt or they’d go after Bruce and she would have gone through all of it for nothing.
She also couldn’t go to the emergency room so OTC pain meds, elastic bandages, and frozen peas
would have to do.

Didn’t much matter though. At this point she could care less if her whole fucking arm fell off. In one
day, one single day, she’d managed to destroy her entire life and in less than half an hour she
managed to destroy the trust of the only men she’d ever cared about.
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Eleven

She walked down the stairs slowly, sore from the rough handling she’d endured and feeling as
though she was marching towards her own execution. The door to the Lair was open. Felicity glanced at the mangled security panel and sighed but left it. She made her way down the stairs, Oliver’s eyes following her silently.

He sat in her computer chair, an ice pack pressed to the back of his head as he rested his elbows on his knees. The security footage from the roof was looped on playback and both men stared at her; one in shock, the other in anger.

“Leave us alone, Dig,” Oliver ordered him in a harsh tone.

“Oliver, just let Felicity—“ he began.

“Now, Dig!” Oliver growled.

The other man didn’t move. He turned to Felicity offering his silent support and she smiled in return, “It’s okay, you can go. We’ll be fine.”

“You shouldn’t do this with her now,” Diggle turned back to Oliver. “She’s been through a lot tonight.”

Oliver didn’t look at him or acknowledge his words in any way. Instead he continued to fix Felicity with an unblinking stare of raw fury.

“Go,” Felicity told the other man quietly.

Diggle seemed to struggle with some internal debate for a moment before snatching up his jacket and muttering a curse. As he passed Felicity, he paused to place a hand on her shoulder, “Hey, call me if you need me.” She nodded then he turned to Oliver, a chill in his voice when he addressed him, “Don’t hurt her.”

Oliver’s eyes flicked towards him at that. “I would never put my hands on Felicity and you know that.”

“There’s more than one way to hurt someone, Oliver,” Diggle sighed wearily, making his way to the door and giving Felicity one last quick look of support before he left.

Oliver sat back in the chair, the ice pack dropping to his feet. He flicked his head toward the monitors where the playback was paused. “Explain.”

She didn’t answer him, she just stood there and waited.

Oliver erupted from the chair and it flew backwards on its casters, bouncing hard against the desk causing Felicity to flinch. He pointed to the monitors, “Explain!”

“Explain what?” She asked quietly.

“Explain that!” Oliver thundered, his finger pointing at the security feed accusingly.

She didn’t react to his anger, she was too emotionally spent. “Let’s just skip to the end, okay? I can’t--I just can’t do anymore tonight. Just ask me what you want to know and get it over with.”

“You know him?” He spat out.

“Obviously.” She said wryly.

“You knew him before you even came to Starling City, before you met me or Diggle?”
“Yes.”

“You worked for him.”

It wasn’t phrased as a question but she nodded anyway.

“Were you working with him after you joined us?”

She snorted rudely. “No, of course not! What? You think I’m a plant or some kind of vigilante double agent or something?”

“Are you?” He was obviously not receptive to sarcasm at that moment.

She goggled at him in disbelief for a moment before answering sarcastically, “Yes, Oliver; I moved 3000 miles away from my home, waited a few months in the QC IT department for you to get rescued from the island, twiddled my thumbs until you brought a bullet ridden laptop into my office, waited several more weeks for Walter to get kidnapped, and then to complete my Machiavellian plan to infiltrate your ranks I had your mother shoot you, tricked you into hiding in my car, then proceeded to save your life!” She took a deep centering breath. “What can I say? I’m an evil fucking mastermind.”

“Don’t—“ Oliver leveled an accusing finger at her. “Don’t you dare make this about me! You lied to me! You’ve been lying to me from day one!”

“When?” She said, thoroughly exasperated. “Tell me, when did I lie to you?”

“It was a lie of omission and you know it!” He snapped. “You should have told me from the beginning that you worked for Batman!”

“First off,” she said, doing a slow burn, “I was never an official member of Batman’s team, I was a consultant. I only helped him in the periphery, never in the field, and in a limited capacity—not that it’s any of your damn business—and, how exactly was I supposed to tell you any of that? And when should I have told you, hmm? How was that conversation supposed to go? ‘Oh hi, Mr. Queen. Hey, yeah, bullet ridden laptop? No problem, I used to do this kind of thing for Batman all the time,’” she snorted. “Right.”

“What about when Walter was kidnapped? Or when we were tracking Deadshot? He said he knew him; you don’t think that you should have said something then? That having that knowledge could have helped us?” Oliver said, a vein in his temple throbbing madly.

“What are you saying? That had you known that I had Batman’s personal cell number you would have asked me to give him a ring and borrow a cup of vigilante justice?” She asked scathingly, “You and I both know that if I revealed that I had a history with him you would have frozen me out just to spite yourself and, not only would both of those devices have gone up in the Glades, but you’d be dead or in prison by now.”

“I had a right to know,” he bit out. “I had a right to know who it was that I was trusting with my life.”

“And now that you know, what’s changed? Hmm? Answer me that? Nothing,” She asked rhetorically. “I didn’t tell you about Batman the same way I refused to tell him about you.”

“Then why is he here?” He growled.

“Helena!” She answered sharply. She watched as his eyes flickered slightly in confusion before
answering. “She decided to take her hunt to Gotham and they crossed paths. She decided to drop my name in the middle of their confrontation and it set him off. Unfortunately for her, he didn’t react well to hearing her threaten to put a crossbow bolt through my neck.”

“Did he—is she dead?”

Her face felt as though she had been slapped. Her eyes burned, her cheeks felt raw, and a wrenching pain in her gut nearly made her gag. She took a shaky breath and willed herself to speak, “Yeah, she’s alive.” She grabbed her bag and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” He demanded.

“Home,” she answered tonelessly as she climbed the stairs.

He stood at the bottom of the stairs and glared after her, his face dark with anger. “When you come back here tomorrow you, me, and Diggle will be sitting down to discuss everything—and I mean everything, understood?”

She stopped and turned to face him, her face pale and her shoulders slumped. “I’m not coming back tomorrow, Oliver. Or the next day, or the day after that. I’m done; I’m going home to Gotham.”

“The hell you are!” He burst out.

She nodded, more to herself than to him. “Yes, I am.”

“You’re not going with him,” Oliver growled, one hand on the railing as though he were prepared to physically stop her if necessary.

“No, I’m not, but I am going home,” she said, her eyes red rimmed and reflecting both exhaustion and defeat. “And not because of him, or because of what he said, or because we got a little carried away on the conference table.” He flinched at that but she continued on. “I’m going home because I just can’t do this to myself anymore.” She tilted her head at him and, as she took a step toward him, he instinctively backed one step away, something in her tone and expression forcing him into retreat. She chuckled mirthlessly. “You don’t see it, do you? It just—it flew right over your head and you never even thought about it, did you?”

“What are you talking about?” He asked warily.

“I just told you that Batman, someone I haven’t so much as spoken to in four years, heard Helena Bertinelli threaten to kill me and, in response, traveled 3000 miles to find me. He may be a complete and utter bastard but he still cared enough to drop everything just to keep me safe whether I wanted him to or not. You heard the same thing and your first instinct was to ask if she was okay---if the woman who once held a weapon to my throat and who told Batman that she wanted to see me dead, was okay.” She shook her head and turned to ascend the stairs again. When she got to the door, she paused to give him one last glance, “For a man so preoccupied with the concepts of loyalty, trust, and friendship, you have a lot to learn.”

Felicity forced her eyes open as her alarm went off and looked at the clock, her eyes swollen and full of grit. The last thing she felt like doing was getting up to eat brunch all the way across town (even if it was with her dad), but she also knew there was no way around it. Feeling as though she had been run over by a very enthusiastically driven steamroller, she fumbled for the Aleve on her nightstand, popped three, and then headed for the tub.
The tub had been what sold the house for her. It was cast iron, scratched up and ancient, but it was huge. It was also cold as Isabel Rochev’s ass in the wintertime before it warmed up, but once the hot water started flowing it was like sinking into heaven. She was going to miss her tub, she thought, ducking under the water and holding her breath until her lungs protested before reaching for the soap and a wash cloth.

She bathed quickly but thoroughly, leaving long before her fingers and toes pruned (even though she really, really wanted to just soak for a few hours) then began to get dressed. She looked through her closet (which occupied an entire room next to hers) and decided on a lady-like Oscar de la Renta silk sundress she had bought at a high-end second hand shop in Coast City a few years back. It was a bit cold outside, although warmer than it had been lately, and the dress was sleeveless so she paired it with a matching white cashmere and silk cropped cardigan that would keep her warm while it hid the bandages on her arm and wrist.

She loved the A-Line silk chiffon dress with its modest sweetheart neckline and skirt that flared to just below her knees, but rarely got to wear it. It had probably been originally purchased by some bridesmaid for a summer wedding but their ‘never the bride’ angst was her gain and the pretty pink flowers and green ivy embroidery made her happy. She needed happy today. How she was going to tell her dad that somehow, between yesterday afternoon and brunch today, she’d decided to chuck it all and move back home she hadn’t a clue. She grabbed some underwear and stockings from her drawer and sighed; God, she felt like such a failure.

She finished dressing quickly, keeping her makeup light and her hair loose, then slipped on her glasses and a pair of rose colored Charlotte Olympia slipper flats designed with a smiling kitty face on the toe. Yes, she was dressed like a five year old going to her first princess party but she really, really needed to be daddy’s little girl today so Gloria Steinem could just shove it up her ass. Today she needed to hear how pretty she looked followed by a whole mess of ‘poor baby’s’. She’d be a strong and confident feminist who could stand on her own two feet tomorrow.

When she got to the restaurant at the Marchioness and saw her dad’s smile light up as he caught sight of her it was all she could do not to burst into tears and run into his arms. Taking a deep breath she fixed a smile to her face and hugged him tight, taking a few extra seconds to lean into his embrace and breathe in his scent: peppermint, cherry pipe tobacco, and Bay Rum aftershave.

“What’s wrong?” Her dad asked, pulling away so he could look at her carefully.

“Nothing’s wrong, Daddy. I’m fine,” she said easily.

“The only time you ever say ‘I’m fine’ is if you aren’t fine.” Her face crumpled a little and he sat her down, patting her hand gently and handing her a handkerchief. “It’s okay Baby, just take a breath and tell me what’s wrong.”

She wiped her eyes and nose (as if crying in public wasn’t humiliating enough, she had to add ‘snot machine’ into the mix) and forced a little laugh, “Daddy, stop being so nice to me. I really, really don’t deserve it, not today.”

“Tell me what happened,” he said gently, tipping her head up so he could look into her eyes.

It was all she could do not to start blubbering and wailing when he did that. “I quit my job,” she said with a hitch in her voice. “I’m sorry.”

Her dad’s lips twitched upwards and he rubbed her back soothingly. “Is that all that’s got you upset? You quit your job?”
“You’re not mad or disappointed in me?” She asked tremulously.

“Why would I be mad? Baby, do you know how many jobs I’ve left in my lifetime?” He asked her with a chuckle. “A lot more than just one, I’ll tell you that.”

“But—” she started, preparing to launch into a litany of self-recriminations using words like ‘failure’ and ‘disloyalty’ but he stopped her.

“You could never disappoint me, Baby,” he told her with the same gentle smile he’d used when wiping her tears as a child. “You are strong, smart, kind, and beautiful just like your mother was. I will always be proud of you, no matter what you do.”

“Can I come home?” She asked in a small voice, hating herself for the way she sounded but needing to hear the answer nonetheless.

“Of course you can,” her dad told her, looking slightly affronted. “You can always come home and you know that.”

“I want to come home,” she said in a steadier voice, the tightness in her chest loosening a bit.

“Baby, what happened?” He asked her, gesturing for the waiter that they needed to take another moment or two.

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “I mean, work was fine and all, I just—” she swallowed and struggled to find the correct balance between the truth and the lies she knew she would have to tell him. “I realized after the meeting that this just isn’t what I want to do anymore.”

He didn’t say anything at first; he just looked at her with his wise and clever dark eyes sweeping over her face. It was as though he could see through her, see every secret she had squirrelled away inside of her heart, and she felt her skin flush with embarrassment. He took a deep breath, folded his arms on the table, and frowned. “You know, when I heard you had taken that job upstairs with Oliver Queen I admit it threw me a bit,” he said slowly. “You’ve never been interested in that side of things and I worried that the best part of you, the creative part you got from your mother, would be crushed under all the corporate back-biting and politics. When I saw you looking so sharp and in control yesterday I almost didn’t recognize you. It actually made me a little sad.”

“Why?” She asked, taking off her glasses to put them aside as they began to fog up, wiping her nose again with the handkerchief.

“Because that woman didn’t look like my Felicity. She looked like a predator, someone out for blood, a dime a dozen corporate barracuda; that kind of thing might suit a woman like Isabel Rochev and her ilk but that’s not who you are. It worried me a lot. I was afraid that Starling City had changed you and I was losing my little girl.”

“You could never lose me, Daddy,” Felicity said, scooting over so she could lay her head against his shoulder.

He took her hand in his and rubbed her fingers which had gone cold from the emotional upheaval, “Do you remember why your mother named you ‘Felicity’?”

“She said it was because I was her happiness,” she said without having to think about it. Her dad loved telling her that whenever she got upset.

“You have to do what makes you happy, Baby, not what makes everyone else happy. You’ve always tried to make other people happy, fix everyone and everything, but that’s not how life works.
You can’t take that much responsibility onto yourself; not even the strongest of men could handle that much weight on their shoulders. The only way to change the world is to change you, fix you, and then everyone else can see that and follow suit.”

“I love you,” she said, pulling away and looking at her dad.

“I love you too, Happy,” he smiled and she grinned back at him, the tears finally clearing up once and for all.

“Thank you, Daddy,” she said smiling. The man was simply made out of magic. In two seconds flat he managed to turn 24 hours’ worth of shit into pure sunshine.

“Now,” he said, bussing her forehead with a tender kiss then scooting his chair back into place, “let’s have some breakfast.” He picked up the menu and motioned the waiter over. “My cholesterol came back last week and the doc said that horrible muck Peggy Ann calls oatmeal has been doing its job so today I’m going to splurge a little, what do you say?”

They ordered a huge spread (Felicity, in addition to being a stress eater, was also a brunch enthusiast) of whole wheat pancakes, fresh fruit salad, spinach and leek frittata, smoked turkey sausages, and tea. She always drank tea with her dad who claimed that coffee always smelled better than it tasted.

They had just tucked in and she was feeling better and more relaxed than she had in ages when the other shoe dropped.

“Mind if I join you two?”

“Bruce!” Lucius said as he rose up from his seat to offer the other man a hearty handshake. “Of course--sit, sit! We haven’t even started yet.”

“Good morning,” Bruce turned a sharp toothed smile in her direction, his eyes glittering dangerously as he took the chair that was open beside her. “You look very pretty today, Baby. I think I like that dress even more than the one you had on yesterday. It suits you,” he said, running his eyes over the sheer white chiffon and silk that seemed to make her already pale complexion appear even more translucent.

“Thank you,” Felicity responded in a manner that was less than enthusiastic. In fact it was probably downright morose but he was pissing on her parade just when she was starting to feel better. Asshole, she pouted internally as she poked her eggs with her fork, her appetite gone.

The waiter eased over and Bruce turned to him, “I’ll have the same thing my friends are having and coffee, please. Black.”

“I don’t see how you and Felicity drink that stuff,” Lucius said good naturedly as he dug into his frittata. “This is delicious,” he said enthusiastically. “Peggy Ann hasn’t let me have an egg in months!”

“It certainly looks good.” He turned to Felicity, “Something wrong with your frittata, Baby? You’re not eating,” Bruce asked her with a knowing undertone as he watched her shift her food around her plate.

“It’s fine, I’ve just lost my appetite all of the sudden,” Felicity said, not giving him the satisfaction of looking at him.

Her dad frowned at her and reached out to pat her shoulder briefly, “It’s going to be alright, Baby.”
“I’m sorry, is something wrong?” He asked innocently.

Her father gave her another supportive look before answering, “Felicity has decided to leave Queen Consolidated and come back home for a while.”

“Did something happen?” He asked in mock concern.

The flying-rat bastard, Felicity snarked internally.

Her father answered for her. “No, no—she just didn’t like the path her career there was taking and decided to take a break for a while until she figures out where she wants to go next.”

“Well, I think that’s a splendid idea!” Bruce said with a note of triumph. “After all, Felicity started college before most kids her age were even thinking about high school then came graduate school, then QC’s Tech Division, then straight up to the executive level—if you ask me it’s about time she took a break.”

“He’s got a point, Baby. Bruce, you went to—where was it; Nepal after Yale?” Lucius asked and Bruce nodded. “Maybe you could travel for a while like Tam and Luke did? Go see Europe—maybe see if Tam wants to go with you. I’m sure we could arrange for her to make it a working vacation, catch up on some of our European operations for a few months in between all the sightseeing.”

Before Felicity could answer, Bruce broke in. “I don’t think she’ll want to do that, Lucius. There’s been a lot of foreign unrest lately, plus the stress of all that travel; I think she’ll probably want to stay in Gotham—for a while at least.” His eyes met hers and she could see the shadow of the Bat creeping into them.

Lucius chuckled, “Listen to you, Bruce. You’re more protective of my daughter than I am!”

“I’ll think about it,” Felicity said, “the traveling. For now though, Bruce is right, I’d like to stay home for a while first.” Her napkin fell from her lap and she slowly bent in her chair to pick it up, her muscles still sore despite the OTC pain reliever she had taken that morning.

“Besides,” Bruce said confidently, “Noah Cedars is retiring from WayneTech in a couple of years. If Felicity wants to go back to that then I can give him a call when she’s ready and she can try working with him for a while. If it works out then—“ He stopped abruptly, his eyes locking on her shoulder as she reached under the table.

Felicity frowned then flicked her eyes toward what had his attention. The collar of her cardigan had slipped out of place exposing part of her shoulder and collarbone where dark finger-shaped bruises stood out against her pale flesh. She had barely given them a second thought that morning before she left. It wasn’t all that unusual seeing bruises on her skin given her training in the Foundry and the level of danger they faced on a regular basis.

She sat up, straightening her sweater as she settled back into her chair.

Lucius chuckled, apparently not noticing Bruce’s sudden discomfiture. “She just quit one executive assistant position and you’re already—“ His phone buzzed on the table in front of him. “It’s the QC Marketing people. I’m just going to step away and get this if that’s alright.”

Felicity squirmed and fidgeted by pushing up the sleeves of her sweater nervously under Bruce’s gaze as he answered for them both, “No, go ahead. I’m sure Felicity and I will be—“ He flinched, “fine.”

She looked down and noticed the bandage she’d wrapped around her arm and the bruises and
contusions on her other wrist were visible. She licked her lips nervously and smoothed down the sleeves of her cardigan so her father wouldn’t see.

“I’ll be right back,” he told them before picking up and wandering away to the lounge to finish the call.

As soon as he was out of earshot Bruce asked her in a low voice, “Are you alright?”

She took a sip from her now cold tea before answering, “It’s just a few bruises. I’ve had worse. Try crash landing through two plate glass windows forty stories above the ground sometime.” He flinched again. “Yeah, well, look who I’m talking to, right?” She muttered as she reached for the teapot.

“How bad?”

“What?” She asked mid-pour.

“The bruising; how bad is it?”

She shrugged, “I don’t know, didn’t really bother looking this morning. Pretty decent; you had a good grip on me plus the shaking. I know it hurt like hell last night, I hardly slept a wink even with the heating pad.” She snorted, “Not that I have any room to complain. I mean, I guess I’m lucky when you think about it.” She mused on that for a minute as she sipped her tea, some of her frustration slipping through in her tone. “I should probably thank you for not hurting me worse seeing how you feel about people like me. You know, murderers and such.”

“Don’t,” Bruce said, rubbing his hand over his eyes, his jaw clenched. “Just don’t.”

“But that’s what I am now, right Bruce?” Felicity said coolly, the fire in her belly returning. She knew she was being cruel but, damn it, she was tired of him invading her life. “I imagine Helena got a lot worse. Of course, her body count is a lot higher, so…”

“Stop it,” Bruce said tightly, his eyes burning into hers.

She took a deep breath and picked at her fruit salad. “Fine, I’ll stop.” She looked over to him and saw as his eyes traveled from her collarbone to her arm and back up again as though he could see her injuries through her clothes. “I’m okay, really. Just relax Bruce, you’re not the first person to slap me around or leave a few bruises since I’ve come to Starling City. It’s not a big deal.”

Bruce stood up abruptly, throwing down his napkin, and stalked out of the dining room without saying another word. Felicity kept her eyes firmly fixed on her plate, refusing to feel guilty about what she’d done to him. Yes, it was horribly bitchy, cruel, and passive aggressive but he was the one who stormed into her life, not the other way around. If he was going to ruin her life and leave a few bruises in his wake then he should expect payback.

She pushed her plate back and cradled her head in her hands. This was so fucking unfair! I should not be feeling guilty right now, she told herself. I should be happy I got to twist the knife a little, so why do I feel like complete shit? She just was not built for revenge at all. Felicity Smoak; doormat, punching bag, and wuss at your service.
Chapter Twelve

When her dad got back to the table and asked where Bruce had gone she told him that he’d gotten a
phone call and had to leave unexpectedly. Lucius was used to Bruce’s sudden comings and goings so the vagaries didn’t even faze him. They finished their brunch and she rode with him in the limo to the airport. She hugged him goodbye and promised to call him later in the week after she’d taken care of packing up her house, talking to her landlord, and returning her car to the leasing company. Bruce hadn’t been there but she didn’t expect him to be either. She knew full well that, despite the few well-placed blows she’d landed at brunch, he wouldn’t leave town until she did.

The hotel limo drove her back to her car and she finally got around to buying those groceries she’d been promising herself. Ironic that I get around to filling my fridge as I’m about to move, she thought looking into the canvas tote ruefully.

Still it would be nice to not have to leave the house for a while. She could now gorge on ice cream as she packed up the broken remnants of her shattered life and career without having to wear her pajamas in public anymore.

She opened her door, tossing her purse into the chair by the small console table, only to freeze in her tracks. Her breath caught in her throat and she nearly dropped her groceries before she realized that the large figure staring out of her living room window was Bruce. She heaved a sigh of relief and irritation as she plopped the bag on her kitchen counter and rounded on him. “Damn it, Bruce! You can’t just break and enter any time you feel like it! And, by the way,” she said to his turned back, “if you had scared me into dropping the eggs, then you were getting on your knees and cleaning them up. Frankly, at this point, I could give a rat’s ass about your dry cleaning bill.”

She hauled out her Ben and Jerry’s (Cherry Garcia, Coffee Coffee Buzz Buzz Buzz, Late Night Snack, Phish Food, Mint Chocolate Cookie, and Karamel Sutra; a week was a long time and she did have a lot of packing to do) and stuck them in her fridge along with her other perishables before turning her attention back to her uninvited visitor. He hadn’t moved from where he had been standing, never acknowledged her or spoke, and it was really beginning to creep her out. Starling City was once home to serial killer who turned women into plastic dolls (she should know; she was almost made a permanent guest at his teddy bear tea party) and Bruce was looking a little too statue-like for her comfort.

She walked over to where he was standing and touched his shoulder warily, “Bruce?”

He turned to her, the deep grooves that framed his mouth standing out. Slowly, carefully, he reached out to her. His fingers lifted her sweater off her shoulders and it slid down her arms and onto the floor. She should have objected, backed away quickly, or at least protested the treatment of her very white, very expensive sweater being tossed on floors that hadn’t been swept or vacuumed for longer than she cared to admit, but she was frozen to the spot.

His eyes were haunted and waves of pain flowed from them. He focused on the black and blue marks covering her shoulder then the other injuries marring the fragile skin of her wrist. It looked much worse than it was. Her pale complexion and sensitive skin made the bruises stand out even in the low light. He then unwrapped the bandage on her right forearm, his jaw clenching as the dark mottled skin and broken capillaries came into view. Slowly and with infinite tenderness, his hand, the same one that had gripped her shoulder the night before, traced each of the impressions that he had left behind finally stilling over the worst one on her collar bone that was tinged red on the very edges, probing the bone carefully.

He took a shuddering breath and his eyes moved to her now exposed forearm. He lifted her arm and stoked along the dark and angry imprint his lack of control had caused before testing her elbow and wrist gently then probing both her radius and ulna as he watched her face for any sign of pain. She flinched when he squeezed the edge of the bruise and he froze. Bruce’s eyes left her face and
focused back on her arm. He swallowed and licked his lips as he assessed the damage, seeing that it was bruised but not broken. His hand left her elbow and stroked down her other arm, careful not to brush against the scabbed and rough scrape from his gauntlet that ran almost to her wrist, as he took both her hands in his and squeezed lightly.

Her breath caught in her throat as she watched his face crumple and he tugged her close, burying his nose in her hair. “I’m sorry, Baby. I’m so, so sorry.”

She had a million reasons, good reasons, to push him away and rail at him for everything he had put her through but, instead, she put her arms around his shoulders and ran her fingers soothingly through his black hair as she laid her head on his chest. “It’s okay, we’re okay. I’m fine.”

They stood there for a long time in the dimming light of late afternoon. He began to sway them back and forth slightly as though they were dancing to some silent melody playing in his mind. Finally, reluctantly, he pulled away just enough so that he could meet her eyes. “I swear to you, on everything I am, I will never touch you like that ever again. Never again.” There was so much raw emotion in his face, a face that was usually so closed off and stoic, her eyes began to fill at the sight. His hand cupped her cheek as his thumb wiped away the gathering tears. “I’m so sorry; I swear to God I never meant to hurt you. I can’t…” His face paled and he hung his head in shame as he shook his head. “Please. I wouldn’t blame you if you hated me but, please…”

It was stupid, she was stupid. Later on she would call herself every kind of idiot for doing it but she couldn’t help it. Seeing the agony written on his expression and feeling the need to make it right again she lifted herself on her toes and kissed him softly.

He tightened his arms around her and kissed her back.

From there, well, everything was a bit of a blur. Looking back later Felicity honestly couldn’t even remember how they’d gotten to her bedroom. It was kind of like when you’re driving to work and one minute you’re in your driveway and the next thing you know you’re sitting at your desk. She didn’t know which one of them in the metaphor was the car and which one was the desk but it was definitely gearing up to be a ride to remember.

One minute she was fully clothed in front of her couch and the next thing she knew her glasses had disappeared and Bruce was kissing and sucking her neck as they were laying on her bed with her bra clutched in his fist. It wasn’t even a nice bra; it was an old t-shirt bra with some little strings of elastic threads hanging off it and a couple of bent clasps in the back. It didn’t even match her panties, the full brief kind that came up to her belly button. The part of her brain still somewhat aware of that sort of thing told her not to worry about it because those had mysteriously vanished as well along with the clothes he had been wearing because...

She gasped as he bit down on her nipple, her hands clutching at his bare shoulders. She could feel his hard shaft pressing against her as he continued to explore her with his mouth and fingers.

And then there were her pantyhose, she thought through her passion-filled fog. Not the sexy thigh high kind with the fancy lace garter belt; the ones from the plastic egg (the kind that you had to do the chicken dance just to haul up all the way). She was pretty sure that getting those off of her required the application of some kind of alien technology or Bat Disintegration Ray but her eyes had been closed so she couldn’t really say.

Must be something they learn in the Billionaire Playboy’s Club or in Vigilante Prep School, she thought muzzily as his fingers ran along her inner thigh until he was stroking her and ---oh, that’s nice. She cried out again and began to arch and squirm against him as he hummed against her throat in smug amusement.
His mouth trailed down to her breast once more where he alternated between licking, sucking, and lightly teasing her nipple with his teeth. She ran her fingers through his inky black hair, the clean scent of his spicy cologne making her head swim as his fingers and mouth made her pulse with want.

“Bruce,” she moaned, “Oh God, I’ve missed this,” she said then almost managed to fluster herself out of a good time when she realized she’d said it out loud. She sucked in a breath to launch into a ramble but then he lifted his head, pinning her with his hot gaze.

His lips captured hers in something that was less like a kiss and more like a brand of ownership. His mouth then left hers to find her earlobe and captured it between his teeth, sucking gently. His tongue began to stroke the sensitive flesh and she whimpered and squirmed against his fingers.

“Oh Baby,” he whispered against her ear, “You and I both have a lot of time to make up for.” He chuckled causing her to shiver with need.

Her fingers scraped his scalp as his mouth traveled down her throat again and then further on until he found her breast. He sucked one of her hard nipples into his mouth and captured it between his teeth as his tongue flicked back and forth causing a new flood of moisture between her thighs. “God, you are so wet,” he said in a near growl. When two of his fingers entered her she sucked in a slightly pained breath and he stilled. “How long, Baby?”

“It’s been a while,” she said, her flesh flushing in something other than passion.

“How long is a while?” He asked, watching her carefully.

She knew what he was asking. She bit her lip, suddenly embarrassed. “A little over four years.”

She saw as the realization of what she was telling him registered. “Oh Baby,” he breathed; his voice heavily laden with lust and amusement, “only you would give someone your virginity twice.”

She frowned, “I don’t really think it counts the second time,” she said right before he slid up her body and captured her mouth in a deep kiss.

He sucked and nibbled her lips and she gasped against his mouth as his fingers made clever swirling motions that she swore meant he had to have three hands down there. She felt the pleasure in her build and build as his tongue curled around her earlobe just as his fingers curled inside of her and…

She…Was…Gone.

She screamed so loud the neighbors probably called the cops. Then, even before the echoes had faded away, he was pressing inside with a moan that sounded almost inhuman. She gasped at the initial burn but then he began to stroke inside of her, filling what had been empty for far too long. She looked at his face, at the exquisite look of pleasure and passion in his expression, and closed her eyes as he captured her lips again, his hips surging forward just as his tongue tangled with her own.

He was pushing, pushing, pushing; his fingers dug into her hips lifting her into the thrusts of his body. Deep, hard, long, and then he hit rock bottom and lightning struck her spine.

She nearly screamed again. Her toes curled and she couldn’t breathe and, fuck, it felt like pain and pleasure at the same time and she never wanted it to end. “Please, oh God! Don’t stop! Never stop! Please!” She sobbed in a ramble out loud and in her head. He growled and suddenly she knew it was her favorite sound in the whole world.

His thrusts began to jerk against her roughly, his rhythm becoming more and more irregular. It felt as though he was getting bigger somehow and then she made a sound that she didn’t even know a human being could make as her body shuddered and she fell over the edge. He thrust so hard inside
her she slid up the bed a few inches and then he roared.

She shut her eyes tight as everything became about the moment. For one brief moment she was all sensation. Tremors ran down her body as she buried her face into his neck. He collapsed against her, breathing raggedly.

He rolled off her onto his back, his chest glistening and his dark hair damp with sweat. She curled up beside him and laid her head against his chest as he wrapped his arm around her back and traced lazy circles against her skin.

“Are you okay,” he asked a little breathlessly.

“I don’t know,” she panted, pressing her hand against her breastbone. “I think I might be having a heart attack.”

Bruce chuckled again and pulled her up his side so he could capture her mouth in a brief kiss. “Not bad for an old man then?” He asked her, his eyes sparkling with laughter. “After all, according to you I could be someone’s grandfather.”

“I think if you were any younger I’d be dead right now,” Felicity said honestly.

He kissed her temple then rolled onto his side so he could trace soft kisses over her cheek and across her throat. He nuzzled her ear and seemed to breathe her in. Her fingers moved upwards to card through his dark hair as he lifted his head to look her in the eyes, “I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you.”

“I know,” she said quietly. “I told you, it’s just a bruise, it looks worse than it is. I’m fine.”

His finger stroked the tender skin of her shoulder, “Not just this; all of it.” He looked up at her again, his eyes heavy with emotion, “I’m sorry.”

Felicity closed her eyes, unable to speak as she felt the weight of his words. “Thank you,” she said last. Despite herself she heard her voice break as tears pricked her eyes.

“No,” he said quietly, brushing them from her cheeks. “No crying.” He made a soothing noise.

“No, it’s--” she hiccupped and looked at him with a wobbly smile, “They’re happy tears, Bruce. I’ve waited…a long time to hear you say that and now…”

“I’m sorry,” he breathed against her forehead as he laid a tender kiss there. “I’m so, so sorry, Baby. I never wanted to hurt you. Never you.”

“Don’t be sorry, Bruce,” she told him quietly as she stroked her fingers down his neck and across his cheeks. “Just don’t do it again, okay?”

“Okay.” He pulled away and smiled down at her, a soft smile that made her heart squeeze in her chest. Words she had no business speaking out loud nearly bubbled forth before he kissed her again, soft and sweet. “Close your eyes, Baby,” he told her as he pulled her to him a little closer, stroking her hair tenderly. He rolled onto his back, his arm wrapped around her as his fingers stroked down her side to rest on her bare hip. For a moment, for just the briefest of seconds, it almost felt like love.

She laid her head on his chest, took a deep breath, and faded away.
A few hours must have passed because the world outside her bedroom window was dark and still. There was a soreness and an unfamiliar stickiness between her thighs and she could smell his cologne on her sheets. She moved her fingers across the bed, blindly searching for Bruce only to find empty space. A noise from across the room made her sit up, sheets clutched to her naked breasts, her hair a riotous mass of curls.

Bruce was standing at the end of her footboard pulling the deep charcoal V-neck sweater he’d been wearing over his head. She looked at him blearily and tried to push the rat’s nest of blonde hair out of her face. She puffed a breath at the bits trying to worm their way up her nose then smiled softly, “Where are you going?”

He froze. For a second it tickled her that she had actually managed to get the drop on Batman in the dark but then something clicked and her brain came back online. “You’re leaving?” She asked in confusion, “You’re leaving and you weren’t even going to wake me up first? Why?”

His features shifted and settled into that grim countenance that rarely boded well for anyone. She knew that look.

She’d seen that look on his face before and under very similar circumstances.

“You’re leaving?” She asked incredulously.

Very similar circumstances.

“Felicity…” He began.

“Again?!” She yelled, her temper flaring to volcanic levels. “You have got to be kidding me! You said--!”

“Felicity, it’s just not---!”

She grabbed the first thing she could find which was, unfortunately, her cell, and threw it at his head as hard as she could. His reflexes, being what they were, allowed him to deflect it handily.

That was unfortunate as well because braining him with something hurled at great velocity would have felt pretty great. For her anyway. Suddenly she had a new goal in life: Bruce meet projectile. Projectile meet BatBrain.

“You bastard!” She growled, tumbling out of bed. Her feet tangled in the sheets and she took a nasty fall onto the floor. He bent as though to help her up but she began hitting at him with the fist that wasn’t clutching the bedding concealing her nakedness.

“Stop it! You’re going to hurt yourself!” He backed out and she struggled to her feet to chase him into the kitchen. “Felicity, stop!” He ordered as he batted away the various objects she was grabbing at random and hurling in his direction.

“Four years!” She yelled, ignoring him. “I haven’t been able to even think of allowing another man to touch me for four years because of you! It took me two years to get to the point where I could even consider going out on a date with someone after what you did to me, and that was a total disaster because you left me an emotional basket case! You come here, you apologize, you promise you won’t hurt me again and then you do this? Seriously?!” She snatched her favorite cereal bowl from the dish rack and threw it at him. “What was the point of all this? What did I ever do to you?”

She reached over and snatched a vase off the table and lobbed it in his direction. “First you take my self-esteem!” Coffee decanter. “Then you take my job!” Mug that says ‘Tech Girls Do It Beta’.
“Then you threaten me and force me from my home and my friends!” Mexican hand-painted platter.
“You stalk me when I’m trying to have brunch with my father!” Toaster. “And then — AND THEN —” Blender. “You have sex with me!” Ceramic TARDIS cookie jar. “Again!” Aloe Vera plant in a terra cotta pot. “After four years!” Bread box. “After promising not to hurt me ever again!” Ceramic frog soap dish. “Only to turn around!” Calphalon butcher block cutting board. “Just so you can sneak out on me!” Handfuls of fridge magnets because, by then, her counters were pretty much clear. “Like a fucking coward!”

“Felicity,” he said slowly, his hands stretched outward in a defensive posture just in case she started digging under the kitchen sink next, “my world is too dangerous—“

“Fuck you and your world you Bat-Eared Bastard!” She screamed so loud that her own ears began to ring. “Get out of my house and don’t you dare show your face around here ever again!”

“Felicity—” She reached behind her to the small wine cabinet and just grabbed and threw whatever was there. The bottle of expensive wine exploded near his head, splashes of the deep crimson liquid splattering and staining his clothes.

“OUT!” She screamed and, taking one last look at her he slipped silently out the door.

After he left she collapsed on the floor in a heap of bedding. She sobbed, great, messy, soul churning sobs that made her lungs ache and her throat hurt. By the time dawn began to peek over the horizon she was in misery. Her ankle was sore and swollen from where she had fallen, her face was hot and blotchy from crying, her nose felt like someone had chewed it up and spit it back on her face, her lungs hurt, her throat hurt, her eyes felt like they were sunburned, and her last bottle of wine was now just a stain on the carpet. And then it got worse.

Apparently her volley of the toaster went wide and knocked her purse on the floor because her new birth control was lying beside it.

She’d bought them on Thursday but in all the excitement she’d forgotten to actually start them.

They hadn’t used a condom.

“Fuck.”

“What’s the matter, honey? Flu’s pretty bad this year, you need some cold medicine? Aisle 2,” an older woman wearing a white lab coat with the name ‘ROZ’ embroidered on the pocket told her.

“No,” Felicity said hoarsely then cleared her throat as she limped up to the counter. She knew she looked like hell but this just confirmed it. She sniffled, wiping her nose with a tissue that should have been tossed two blows ago. “Do you sell Plan B?”

“Sure thing, my darling,” the woman reached behind her and placed the pastel box on the counter between them, “$49.99 plus tax.”

“For one pill?” Felicity asked incredulously.

“Like I tell my girls, honey; buy the condoms first and you’ll come out cheaper.”

Felicity blew out a breath and reached for her wallet, “Yeah well, don’t have to worry about that. I’m probably never having sex ever again.”
“That’s what they all say, bubeleh.” She eyed her reproachfully as she ran her card and put the emergency contraception in a white paper sack. “Take my advice and buy the condoms. Trust me, there’s worse things than catching babies.”

“Thanks but I can guarantee I won’t need them.”

“Uh huh, whatever you say, honey. You just take care of yourself and I hope you get to feeling better soon.”

“Thanks,” she said morosely. “But I doubt that’ll be happening either.”

She woke up Monday morning to the sound of her new phone ringing. It was yet another reminder of what had happened.

That and the fact that smartphones made expensive projectile weapons.

“Hello,” she croaked.

“Hello Ms. Smoak.”

Felicity buried her face under her pillow, phone and all. “Isabel? Why are you calling me at—” she glanced at her phone—“8am?”

“Because it’s Monday morning and I’m at work,” she said wryly.

“Yeah, well, good for you,” Felicity mumbled, “You must not have heard but I quit last week.”

“I did hear which is why I called you on your cellphone and not at your desk.”

“Okay,” Felicity whimpered as she pulled her head out from under the pillow and flopped over onto her back.

“I’m calling to make sure you haven’t forgotten that we were meeting for lunch later.”

She rubbed her forehead and squinted at her ceiling in confusion. “Um, can you repeat that because it’s really early for me and I haven’t had any coffee in two days because my pot is…broken.”

“Lunch. One o’clock at Leviathan; do you know how to get there or should I send a car?”

“Wait, you were serious about that?”

“Of course I was,” she said in a slightly bemused tone. “You are coming, aren’t you?”

“You want to have lunch with me?” Felicity asked, her mind still not grasping what was happening. “Just me or with other people and I happen to be in the room?”

“Just us.”

“Uh…” Felicity pinched the bridge of her nose as shook her head, willing herself to focus. “You know what? I don’t think I can make it. Kind of busy today; packing…cleaning out my refrigerator.”

Especially the freezer, she was down to one spoonful of Cherry Garcia and a pint of Karamel Sutra. It had been medicinal she told herself; she used the one packet of healing herbs she had gotten from Oliver and mixed them together. At least, that’s what she told herself in order to justify the first three pints she’d devoured; the last few were purely recreational. She would have eaten the last pint she
had left but the name just struck her as being a little too ironic at the time.

“Felicity, I know there have been moments between us where I was less than kind—“ Felicity couldn’t help her snort but Isabel ignored it and moved on, “but I assure you that I will be respectful and polite and that I truly would like to start over with you.”

She took a deep breath, “I appreciate that, I do, and if this is about Wayne Enterprises or my dad I promise I would never do anything to hurt—“

“This isn’t about that, Felicity. Really. It’s about making amends. Please.”


“Excellent! I have a meeting right now but I’ll see you at 1:00, ciao!”

She stared at her phone in disbelief.

“Someday I have really got to start listening to that voice in my head.”
starling
Felicity approached the restaurant warily wondering for the umpteenth time what the hell she had been thinking. She smoothed her hands over her fitted black and white polka dot dress, straightened her smart looking tweed First Lady jacket, and went inside.

She decided when she left for their meeting that she was going to go for broke. She was gone, outta there, and Isabel would not get the last word in the bitch war. Bruce’s bullshit had primed her for a scrap and she didn’t believe for a second this was a ‘friendly’ lunch. Whatever it was though it had her curious so she said ‘What the hell?’ and decided, if nothing else, she’d enjoy a meal at a 5 star restaurant on Isabel’s dime.

Fire meet frying pan, she thought as she followed the waiter to a private dining room where Isabel was waiting for her.

“I like your dress,” she said, skimming over her figure appreciatively. “Escada?”

“Alice+Olivia, actually,” she said, giving the waiter a smile as he poured her a water.

“Very cute but then you always did have such a lovely sense of style,” she said with a smile and, for a second, Felicity wondered if Isabel paying her a compliment was one of the signs of the Apocalypse.

They ate lunch quietly, spoke in a civilized manner, and Isabel acted as a perfectly composed if cool hostess. Just as their wineglasses had been filled for the last time and their meals all but eaten, Isabel made her move.

“No, I totally agree,” Isabel nodded. “Again I apologize for my unprofessional behavior toward you, but from the moment we met I could tell you weren’t comfortable in the position. There’s no excuse for what I said but when Oliver told me that he asked you to take it and you gave up your career path to follow him, well,” she twisted her lips in a disapproving moue, “I’ve seen a lot of otherwise smart women do foolish things just to follow a man and, I admit, I showed you a great deal of disrespect because I allowed my prejudice about that to inform my behavior.”

“You know,” Felicity leaned forward and folded her hands on the table top, “since we’re being entirely honest and getting everything cleared up between us, why were you so, what’s the word?”
She took a minute to ponder it, “Nope, no other way to say it: why were you such a bitch towards me when you slept with Oliver in Russia?”

Instead of appearing offended, Isabel seemed almost happy that she’d asked the question. “Several reasons actually, but none of them involved social climbing or selling my body so a man could take care of me. There’s a difference between a woman who sleeps with a man because she has no other means of acquiring what she wants and a woman to whom sex is but one of many tools in her arsenal.” She smiled, “I have no respect for women who don’t understand the difference.”

“So, again, why did you sleep with Oliver?” Felicity repeated.

“Why do you think I did?” She asked, a small spark of curiosity lighting her features.

“Well, he’s obviously attractive but I don’t think this was entirely about scratching an itch for you,” she theorized. “You’re not that kind of woman. For all your faults you seem genuinely invested in making QC a success. If I were to guess, I’d say it was some sort of scouting mission on your part; a kind of peek behind his…curtain.”

Her eyes brightened at that. “And what do you think I discovered?”

“I couldn’t say,” Felicity shrugged, sipping her wine. “I’ve never slept with Oliver.”

“Still?” She encouraged.

She debated answering her for a second but then decided to go all in, “Well, knowing what I do know about him, and other men like him,” Bruce, her brain supplied, “I’d say that you found out he isn’t as clueless as he sometimes appears. In fact I’d say you discovered he’s a bit of a control freak and far more intelligent than he portrays himself to be. He doesn’t mind giving others the illusion of his attention and is very in control and methodical but he never truly emotionally connects with the person he’s with. That said, he does have a bad habit of playing a little too close to the edge sometimes and never takes in to consideration how that may affect others around him.”

“And what kind of lover do you suppose he is?” Isabel asked, quirking an eyebrow upward.

“That’s a bit inappropriate,” Felicity demurred.

“We’re two women discussing the politics of sex, I’d say that it’s not only appropriate, but on topic. So, what kind of lover do you think he is?”

“He’s not,” Felicity answered simply.

Isabel seemed almost animated for once. “How so?”

“He’s not anyone’s ‘lover’, he doesn’t allow emotions to play into it. For men like Oliver sex is a means to an end and, if we’re being honest here, I’d say he was scouting you just as hard as you were scouting him. No pun intended,” she added.

“Brava,” Isabel said clapping her hands a few times. “I knew I saw something in you the other day and this,” she indicated the discourse between them, “just proved it. You were spot on, but I would have expected no less from you. I want you to know that I took your words to heart and did my own research on you.” Dark amusement glittered in the other woman’s eyes and Felicity sudden felt very uneasy. “I was impressed and I don’t impress easily.”

“Um, thank you,” Felicity tugged at her earring a bit nervously. “Isabel, while I appreciate the,” she waved her hand over the table, “all this, I get the feeling I’m here for something other than a friendly
handshake.”

“You are,” Isabel said, wiping her mouth daintily.

There was a pregnant pause, “And?”

“I want to recruit you.”

Felicity’s mouth fell open, “You’re offering me a job?”

“I am,” Isabel said evenly.

“But I just quit QC last week, why would I go back?”

“Not for Queen Consolidated, for Stellmoor International.”

She leaned back in her chair and pondered that for a moment. “I don’t get it.”

“What don’t you get?” Isabel said easily. “You have all the qualities we look for: you’re intelligent, observant, you’re tech savvy, independent, loyal, trustworthy, discreet, and you don’t run from a challenge.”

“Thanks, but I don’t know about the last bit,” she said as picked at her Red Snapper with Citrus and Fennel salad. It might as well have been cardboard given the mood she was in. “I think there’s a few people who would tell you that I’ve made running away a habit lately.”

“They’d be wrong,” Isabel said confidently. “There’s a difference between making a strategic retreat and being a coward or a quitter. A simpering little doormat would have let Bruce Wayne back them into a corner at that meeting but you handled him perfectly. Every time he tried to make a power play you countered with one of your own. And, despite our less than, shall we say, ‘cordial relationship’, you instinctively sought out my assistance sensing that not only would I be receptive but that I would use it to our mutual benefit.”

“I don’t know if I was being quite that calculating—“

“Then you’d be selling yourself short,” Isabel broke in. “You planned every nuance of your interaction with Wayne. Don’t deny it; false modesty is for people who are too cowardly or too stupid to embrace their own power.” Isabel smiled again, it was that dead-eyed predator smile that always gave her the willies. “You came to that meeting prepared to do all-out battle. You had a strategy that worked perfectly. Every movement, every inflection, all of it was designed to be a crippling psychological attack against your opponent’s self-confidence. From the color and style of your dress to the perfume you wore, you had Bruce and Oliver thoroughly enthralled.”

“How did you know about the perfume?” Felicity asked in surprise.

Isabel’s smile grew wider, her eyes twinkling like a cat’s when it notices the canary cage door has been left wide open. “Please. There are only two fragrances that make every grown man over the age of thirty miss his mommy: L’Air du Temps and Chanel No. 5. You nailed it with Bruce but you had a 50/50 shot with Oliver and you lucked out. Had he been my target I would have gone with Chanel. Good thing the nanny had taste.” Felicity’s eyes widened slightly and Isabel twinkled again. “You and I both know that women like Moira Queen don’t wipe grubby faces or deal with runny noses, ergo it was the nanny’s favorite perfume.”

“Housekeeper,” Felicity said faintly, suddenly looking at Isabel with new eyes.
Isabel made a dismissive gesture. “Same difference; nanny, housekeeper, sweet maiden aunt, dearly departed granny who used to bake them cookies and sang to them at bedtime; all men, no matter how strong or powerful, miss the feeling of being that little boy in mommy’s arms. You waged psychological warfare against two of the most powerful men in the world and you won. You knew that if you gave Bruce the satisfaction of so much as a glance in his direction the game was lost so you kept his attention by subtly taunting Oliver. You played into his ego and his attraction to you. You made him play your game; ask the questions all men ask when they find a woman desirable: Is she mommy? Is she the sweet little virgin next door? Is she sex and dark desire? Or, is she a challenge? You hit all of those creating a situation where they were so confused and preoccupied with you that we were able to close the deal without either of them having the presence of mind to muck it up. You kept Oliver on point and Bruce on edge and, when he attempted to outmaneuver you, you feinted by drawing me in knowing that I would instinctively engage him. You, Felicity Smoak, are exactly what Stellmoor is looking for.”

Felicity chuckled a little. “I’m sorry, are you looking for a tech or for Mata Hari? Because it sounds like you’re recruiting me to be some kind of femme fatale who can work PowerPoint.”

“Who’s to say that one has to be mutually exclusive from the other?” Isabel countered. “What do you know about Stellmoor International?”

Felicity’s brow furrowed in thought, “Not much. It’s a Vulture Capitalist investment firm—again, no offense—”

Isabel waved her off, “A bit pejorative but somewhat accurate; continue.”

“It’s based out of Seattle but it has strong ties to Europe, Russia, Asia, and the Netherlands. There’s not a lot out there about it, not even that I could find. All I know is that your North American interests are all pretty straightforward; you buy up and dismantle failing companies and sell them for scrap. It’s when you get to your overseas holdings that things get a bit murky. There still seems to be a focus on corporate conquer and castrate but you also have a great many holdings in mining, manufacturing, and medical research.” She paused, “There’s something I need to ask you real quick.”

“Ask.”

“You don’t like me and, frankly, I’m not a big fan of yours either, so why do this? Why offer me a job?” Felicity asked.

“I don’t dislike you, Felicity.” The timbre of Isabel’s voice changed, lowered, and the look in her eyes changed from cool calculation to something considerably warmer. “In fact I’m beginning to enjoy your company immensely. I could easily see us becoming quite friendly with one another in the near future if you were open to it.”

“Huh,” Felicity did a mental double take. “Um…if I’m out of line here then I apologize but, I have to ask; are you…um, are you…?”

Isabel’s lips tipped upward in a sensual smirk, “Am I expressing interest in exploring a less professional and more personal relationship with you? One that I suspect would prove mutually satisfying to us both?”

Felicity’s jaw dropped, “So…wow. Okay, didn’t see that one coming. So that means that you…you want us to…?”

Isabel ran a crimson tipped fingernail over her lips before tapping her chin as though contemplating
the question, “Perhaps, but that has nothing to do with my motivations for offering you the job nor is it a requirement. I’m merely making you aware of the possibilities.”

Holy crap, Xenia Onatopp just made a pass at me. “Huh. I have no idea what to say right now,” Her mind went completely blank for a minute before her brain cells clicked back on. “You—I—um, you should know that I like men. Not that there’s anything wrong with not. I mean, not liking men, that is. But I do. Like men. Not that I’m promiscuous or anything, it’s just my preference. Lesbians are great though; go lesbians!” She said weakly as the word vomit hangover began to cause her head to throb with humiliation.

“I like men,” Isabel said off-handedly. “I enjoy them immensely, in fact. I believe you referred to it earlier as ‘scratching an itch’. Men fulfill that requirement nicely but women…” Again she gave that low and slow smile that Felicity suddenly realized was probably Oliver’s undoing in Russia. “Women are more complex, more sensual.” Again she gave Felicity a once over, “Women speak to me in ways that are more intellectually and emotionally fulfilling. Men scratch the occasional itch but women…Women provide everything else a man can’t.”

“I can’t tell if I’m having a really bad week or a really good week anymore,” Felicity muttered to herself.

“From my perspective it’s getting better all the time,” the other woman said flirtatiously.

Oh boy. “Isabel, while I am incredibly flattered and truly appreciate the ego boost, you have no idea how much I really needed that actually, I’m afraid that we’re just not compatible in that way. Although, were I so inclined, I want you to know I would find you very attractive.”

“Well said,” Isabel said, seemingly not the least bit insulted or disappointed, “but should you ever change your mind…”

“If the bi-curious stage I skipped in college ever rears its head, I’ll be sure to give you a call.”

“And the job offer?”

She thought about it. “I’ll admit I’m curious. I have a lot of questions though. Also, you should know, I’m already committed to returning to Gotham and I don’t know if the offer would extend to the East Coast.”

“Perhaps I can help you with that,” Isabel smirked, some of the cat-ate-the-canary returning to her eyes. “Stellmoor has offices all over the world including Gotham. As for your questions; ask anything you like.”

“What would I be doing there? You started talking about that bit before we, um, got off topic,” Felicity couldn’t help but blush a little at that.

“Same thing you’re doing now only in a much larger capacity and in a way that better plays to your strengths. Stellmoor is run mostly by women, smart women, women who understand how to get what they want and how to be successful doing it. Most major corporations within the tech and weapons development world are run almost exclusively by men. A woman has to work twice as hard and be twice as successful to even be seen as half as worthy as a man within this elite little realm and, as much as one would like to believe that isn’t true, we both know it is. Most politicians and military higher-ups would prefer buying their tanks and tech from men while getting their coffee topped off by a woman. Case in point; Oliver claimed you were his friend, acknowledged your skills, and then proceeded to derail your career so you could be a well-paid secretary.”
She held up her hand to head off Felicity’s protests. “While I have no doubt his feelings toward you are of genuine friendship, I must ask; while you were supporting him in his career how was he supporting yours? Did he move you upstairs to head up the Applied Sciences division even though you are more than qualified? Did he move you into a position where you could eventually take over as his vice-chairman at the board if he was so worried about stacking the deck with ‘trusted friends’? Did he even value your friendship enough to take into consideration how the move from heading an IT team to executive assistant would affect your resume and how future employers might read into that? No.”

Felicity flushed, feeling frustrated because, really, Isabel wasn’t totally wrong. At least, not from an outsider’s point of view. She tried making the same arguments to Oliver herself but he wouldn’t listen to anything she had to say outside of the mission (and the mission was 24/6 with the rest reserved for QC and keeping his head above water). Oliver was always in the present, always on mission, survival taking up all his critical thinking and decision making, so long term planning fell entirely on her. If she were honest, the way Isabel described things was exactly how it would look to any future employers: Felicity the doormat gave up her career to follow her crush to the top only to be dumped in the high-end secretarial pool. What’s worse, she couldn’t defend against that without giving up the real truth. “It’s not that simple, he needed the support of people he trusted while he settled into his position as CEO—“

“And lucky him, he found it. But that’s over now; he settled in and you’re moving on. Now it’s time to figure out what you want and need. You have developed skill sets that would be wasted in most companies outside of Stellmoor, skill sets that you’d be hard-pressed to ever be able to exercise in the same way again.”

“Like what? The ability to schedule meetings and fix my own computer at the same time?” Felicity couldn’t help but quip before taking another swallow from her wine glass.

“I was thinking more along the lines of the type of tech support you give Oliver when he’s out on the streets being the Arrow.” Isabel said easily.

Felicity’s lungs filled with liquid as she choked on her wine. Coughing into her napkin she felt her eyes tear up as she desperately tried to find oxygen. Finally, after successfully gulping in some air, she was able to respond, “I’m sorry? I thought you just said—?”

“That Oliver is the Arrow?” Isabel nodded as though it were common knowledge. “I’ve known about that forever, before I even arrived in Starling City in fact.” She glanced at her through a fall of dark lashes, “No need to deny it, although I already know you’ll try; Stellmoor specifically chose to partner with Queen Consolidated for that very reason.”

“Okay,” Felicity said, wiping her eyes and then her nose with her napkin even though it wasn’t exactly proper etiquette. Inhaling wine, even a nice Riesling, hurt like a bitch and she had snot and tears dripping everywhere, “Okay, let’s pretend you’re right, which you aren’t, but if Oliver was playing Robin Hood after dark and if I were stupid enough to help him, how would Stellmoor even know about it and why would they care? And what kind of job at Stellmoor would require the skills someone providing tech support for a masked vigilante—which, again, is ridiculous because I am not doing that at all and neither is Oliver.”

“Stellmoor isn’t just corporate takeovers and tech, we provide financial and technical support to women who have the ability to change and defend the world around us. Women whose goals match our own, who seek to eliminate all that is evil and corrupt, and who have it within themselves to fight the problems that affect all of us but in the right way. The world needs more than just some masked men beating down thieves, mobsters, and murderers with their fists and arrows. The male vigilantes
like the Arrow, Batman, or the new ones with the meta-abilities like the Flash and Superman, may be occupying the headlines now but there are female heroes as well. And just like in the business world, these women aren’t given the support or recognition they should. We hope to change that.”

“You make it sound like Stellmoor is run by a group of Corporate Raiding Amazons,” she snorted.

“The Themyscirians are a client in fact,” she answered taking her comment seriously.

“Themyscira? As in the mythological Greek city of the Amazons? You’re serious?”

“Very,” Isabel confirmed. “And not just them. I believe you know Sara Lance, otherwise known as the Black Canary. Who do you think provided her with her tech after she left her former employers? Her training? Back up? Who do you think provides her with funds to do what she does now that she’s no longer associated with a certain group that shall not be named? Has she ever told you?”

It was a loaded question: Answer it and she’d be admitting that not only was she aware that Sara Lance was alive before her miraculous ‘home coming’ two years ago and that she was the Canary, it would mean that she was confirming Oliver’s identity as the Arrow. Don’t answer it and it does the same.

“I never met Sara Lance before the boating accident and all I know about her life before then is what I read in the paper. I admit that I do know her, that she and I struck up a friendship of sorts after she began working at Oliver’s club as a bartender on the swing shift, but we’re casual acquaintances at best. Our relationship consists of two mutual friends and her ability to make a mean Margarita. I don’t know where she is or what she’s doing but, I assure you, as far as I know she isn’t currently swinging across rooftops in Starling City.”

Isabel’s smile took on a shark quality again and she hummed in approval. “Stellmoor came to QC so that the Arrow would be free to do what needs to be done but we needed to provide a presence for our agents as well. The Canary considers this her home and, eventually, we hope to help her take on the role of this city’s protector. That said there are other cities that need our particular services as well, Gotham being one of them.” She sighed and folded her hands under her chin. “I’m not saying the Batman and Arrow aren’t doing a good job under the circumstances but, being men, they are limited. Both have repeatedly driven potential allies out of their cities due to some primitive sense of territorialism and it has cost lives and wasted resources. Our goal is to organize and provide support, not just to deliver rough justice in the form of mindless physical violence.” She leaned toward her. “You don’t have to answer this, because I already know you won’t, but how many times have you tried to stop the Arrow from going into a situation half-cocked by injecting some well thought out advise only to be shut out because it’s ‘his’ mission and not yours? Ten times? Twenty? How much easier would it have been to stop the Glades disaster had you had feet on the ground and a team that listened to you as you provided the support necessary to disarm both devices?”

Unable to stop herself, Felicity asked pale-faced, “How do you know there were two earthquake devices? The official reports say there was only one.”

“We have eyes everywhere, access to police and military records, spy satellites, a support network larger than you could ever imagine. We work, covertly of course, with various black ops and scientific research groups.” She looked at her steadily, “The world is even bigger than you ever thought it was Felicity Smoak; don’t let a misplaced sense of loyalty stop you from committing to an even greater mission.” Isabel arose from her chair indicating their meeting was over. Felicity joined suit, albeit on much shakier legs. “Think about my offer and get back to me. There is no deadline on this offer, it’s completely open-ended, so feel free to take all the time you need.”

She reached out for Felicity’s hand and she took it automatically, “I hope to hear from you soon so
that we may embark on a new and hopefully successful chapter of our relationship.”

“Yeah,” Felicity responded, her mind blown and more than a little overwhelmed by all the twists and turns their ‘friendly little lunch’ had taken. “Hope you don’t mind me saying this but you’re even scarier than I thought you were and that’s really saying something.”

Isabelle gave her another enigmatic sphinxlike grin and said, “Don’t worry, I don’t bite. At least, not at lunch; dinner, however, is entirely another matter. Give me a call sometime and we can make arrangements for that as well.”

Two hours later Felicity was still in a fog as she indulged in some retail therapy. She was so far gone into shock and emotional upheaval from the past few days that things like budgets, savings accounts, and price tags didn’t even faze her. Every time she tried to wrap her brain around what was happening or figure out her next move she’d catch a glimpse of a Chado Ralph Rucci or Ellie Saab creation on the rack and head for the dressing room. Finally, after a painful moment at the checkout and with a stack of garment bags in her hand she knew what she had to do.

She dialed Oliver.
Chapter Fourteen

Not calling Oliver wasn’t an option but calling him wasn’t going to be pleasant. Their last meeting was fairly heated—hell, she practically ordered Diggle to pistol whip him! The man was unlikely to be in a receptive mood.

The phone picked up on the second ring. She held her breath.

“This is Oliver.”

“Hi,” she said. It was the first thing that came to mind.

“Can you hold for a moment?” His tone was cool and detached, almost robotic. She listened as he excused himself. After a moment he came back on, “Yes?”

“We need to talk,” she said.

“I’m a bit busy at the moment but I might be able to pencil you in later.”

“Oliver, it’s important. Very important. We need to talk as soon as possible and I can’t do it at the office.” She allowed a hint of irritability to enter her voice because she really didn’t want to deal with his hurt pride or his bullshit. “Is Isabel there because, whatever you do you can’t let her know I’m on the other end of this call. Say ‘I’ll try to get those documents to you later today’ if she’s there.”

He took a moment before answering, this time speaking in a clear and professional tone, “I’m so sorry about that, I'll try to get you those documents later today. Perhaps we can schedule a lunch to go over them sometime? Is tomorrow good for you, say around noon?”

“No, has to be tonight.” She tried to think fast, “Can you get out early and meet me in,” she glanced at her phone, “twenty minutes at the Foundry?”

“Can you make it forty-five?”
“Fine, meet you there.” She hung up without any of the usual niceties and headed for the club.

Verdant was closed on Mondays so the place was practically deserted. Still, she parked around the back and under the metal awning just in case Bruce decided to be a butthead again. She doubted he’d show after what happened two days previously but you could never tell with him. One thing she did know was that if he showed up today she was borrowing one of Oliver’s bows so he could try dodging arrows instead of toasters and cell phones.

She was still pissed about that. Her house was completely wrecked. She wasn’t up to cleaning it yesterday and today she’d been more concerned about getting ready to meet with Isabel so she’d either been avoiding the post-shag debris or just stepping over it. She was seriously considering sending him a bill because it was his fault she flipped her shit and destroyed all that crap while trying to brain him. The worst part was that her coffee mug had left a crack in the drywall. There was no way she was getting her security deposit back. “Ought to charge him for that too.”

She unlocked the doors and approached the keypad. She checked her text messages to see if Oliver had sent the new codes but nothing was there. She considered asking him but decided to flex her brain instead and try out the upgrades she had made to her new phone. Placing it near the pad with the key card device attached she activated the decryption app and waited for the click. “Too easy,” she said, shaking her head as the light turned green and the door unlocked after only a few seconds. She glanced at her phone and grimaced. She was early but not enough to ensure she had time to rework the system. She’d have to talk Diggle through it later.

She looked around the quiet space for a long moment before sitting down to her work station. For all she knew this was the last time she’d ever see this place again but she wasn’t going to dwell on it. She’d cried over too many pints of ice cream this week and it was only Monday. If she kept it up she’d only be miserable but forced to buy a new wardrobe in less than a month and for her that really meant something. Her bungalow had two fairly good sized bedrooms; one she slept in and one that now served as her closet. She used her actual closet space for shoes and even that was a large walk-in. Between all the take-out, gourmet ice cream, and retail therapy she had been indulging in she was not looking forward to getting her credit card statement at the end of the month.

“Too bad Ben and Jerry’s doesn’t have a line of fat-free sugar-free ice cream, even FroYo isn’t going to cut it for too long if this keeps up,” she muttered as she began her searches on Stellmoor International.

She’d researched Stellmoor before, of course. After they found Isabel’s name in the book she’d made it her personal mission but she never found much. She had a little more to go on now given Isabel’s revelations during lunch so she tried giving it a shot using some of the new information.

She lost time as she began to research everything from Stellmoor’s foreign assets to Black Canary and sightings of other female vigilantes. There weren’t many but there were more than there had been since last she checked. Most were normal humans, like Oliver, who merely wished to help their communities, but some were meta-human or alien.

Only in the last year or so had the general populace become aware of the existence of aliens or the mutated humans known as metas who, for no apparent reason, had taken an evolutionary leap causing them to exhibit abilities well above the norm. She knew about them because of her brief affiliation with Batman but she doubted Oliver or Diggle did before they started popping up in Starling just after Harrison Wells’ particle accelerator exploded during a freak storm.

Of course, there was a theory going around that it wasn’t the meltdown of Wells’ machine that caused the surge in metas, but alien manipulation. Granted, so far most scientists felt that the only people positing the alien theory were cranks and crackpots, but Felicity was one of the few people
who knew for a fact that aliens existed. Bruce had run into a few here and there and she’d seen the files. Oliver knew about enhanced humans like those affected by the Mirakuru super-soldier serum but she doubted he’d be open to the idea of aliens. Diggle was a harder read. He was a skeptic in most things but he seemed to accept the idea of the super-soldier serum with little argument and he had more than a passing association with ARGUS. Then again, perhaps it was because he had seen the effects of the drug for himself and for him that still fell under science; fringe science, but science nonetheless.

Due to the surge in meta-human sightings, Bruce, not known as being the most tolerant person in the world, had taken a special interest in this phenomenon. He didn’t trust these super-powered beings and had started a database where he tracked each and every occurrence. It was not done out of blind prejudice but born from the fact that he had seen ‘normal’ humans commit such heinous crimes that the idea of an enhanced human capable of doing the same or worse filled him with dread. She tapped into the backdoor he didn’t know she’d left in the supercomputer she’d built for him and used his database as a jumping off point. Bruce wasn’t the only one studying these meta-humans and he had been tracking those for some time as well. Many scientific and government agencies had begun their own inquiries without the general public’s knowledge. Bruce would have been more than a little concerned if he heard what Isabel had told her during lunch. The idea of a private company building an army of modern Amazons would have sent him into a fit. To him the idea of power unchecked, whether it was held by man or government, was unacceptable even if the intentions were to protect the public good.

As she began to look into any groups who might be aligned with Stellmoor, many of her leads proved to be dead ends but some led to ARGUS, Diggle’s ex-wife’s employer. Supposedly they were some kind of scientific research think tank funded by the government but she knew they were more than that. ARGUS was a black hat government agency with strong connections to the military. They were so enigmatic in fact, that even though they had existed since the Revolutionary war under the banner Armed Revolutionaries Governing Under Secrecy then later during the Civil War as Anonymous Ranger Group of the United States, no one actually knew what their true charter was or how far their reach extended. Officially, the modern ARGUS stood for Advanced Research Group United Support, but it had other names including Advanced Research Group Uniting Super-Humans, although that last bit wasn’t common knowledge.

It appeared that they had some crossover with Stellmoor though and that worried her. Was Lyla their leak? Doubtful, she nearly died protecting their mission and she risked her life to come after them when Waller sent in drones to take out Slade and the entire city. Even though she and Dig broke up after she lost the baby, she was still a trusted team friendly. Was Waller? Oliver had never gone into details but he once worked for Amanda Waller and she was aware of the fact he was the Arrow. Could it have been ARGUS who told Stellmoor about Oliver? It was possible but he’d been the Arrow for over a year before she and Diggle met back up. Isabel could have been lying about knowing Oliver’s secret for that long though and she was with them in Russia. Funnily enough, she’d never even blinked or asked why an injured woman was coming back with them on the QC jet. At the time they’d just been relieved to be going back home so she hadn’t even thought to question it. Isabel had kept her so busy with paperwork and after hearing her bitch at Oliver for most of the flight home the only thing she’d wanted to do was get the hell away from her. Now though it was really giving her something to think about.

What if she didn’t just happen to show up for that flight? What if Amanda Waller, the head of ARGUS, had tipped her off so she could assess Oliver up close and in the field? What if his bedroom skills weren’t the only thing that had caught her interest that weekend? That might have been when Stellmoor caught their coms and realized her place within the team. Being in Russia Felicity had to work with limited tech and do things on the fly. Her encryptions might not have been her rock solid/steel trap usual. That would have made her the weak link, not Lyla or ARGUS.
A shiver ran down Felicity’s spine as she thought about that. What if she’d given Stellmoor a backdoor into everything? Not just the LAIR system and their coms, but the call she’d made to Barbara. That would give them an in to Watchtower—no, she decided quickly. Barbara was almost as fanatical about security as she was, and Bruce, no computer slouch himself, made them look sloppy in comparison. Watchtower was probably safe but it didn’t mean LAIR was.

She glanced at her phone to see if she had time to run a diagnostic and was surprised that she’d been there for well over an hour and he still hadn’t showed up. Concerned, she texted him.

//Are you okay?//

//Coming, just held up. Be there soon//

She rolled her eyes and sighed. She never in a million years thought that she’d wind up becoming yet another woman in Oliver Queen’s life that he ran from.

She ran the diagnostic program in the background and began upgrading the entrance security. By the time she was done another hour and 45 minutes had passed and still no Oliver.

“She said and grabbed her jacket and bag. He could sit and twist; she wasn’t about to wait on him forever.

She left the Lair and was half in her car when he pulled up.

“You’re leaving?” He asked coolly as he stepped off his motorcycle.

“You kept me waiting almost three hours, Oliver. I told you it was important,” she pointed out with a scowl.

“Sorry,” he said, not sounding sorry at all. “I had a tough day at work. My EA quit on me without notice last week and I’ve had to play catch up all day using a temp.”

If it wasn’t for the fact that she now knew his identity was compromised and that a bigger conspiracy was looming over all of their heads she would have flipped him the bird and let him figure it out for himself. “Fine,” she said, slamming the door to her Mini and stalking to the keypad.

“We changed the codes,” Oliver said casually from behind her. “I’ll have to open—“

She keyed in the new code and didn’t even bother turning around to see his expression. “I wrote the security encryptions, remember. By the way, check your phone. I sent both you and Dig the new door codes. The Lair should actually be secure now.”

She could practically hear him grinding his teeth into dust as he followed her down the stairs to her workstation. She immediately clicked on her diagnostics to check that everything was still secure and finished the security sweep that would alert her to the possibility of any bugs or locational listening devices within range.

“You’re the one who wanted to meet so are you going to tell me what you have to tell me or what? I cancelled a dinner meeting for this,” he said in his ‘I’m pissed off so obey and fear me’ voice.

She rolled her eyes and waited another second for the sweep to show an all clear before she turned to face him. “Your identity has been compromised. Isabel knows you’re the Arrow.”

“And how do you know that?” Oliver asked skeptically.
“I had lunch with her today and she told me.”

“She had lunch with you after you punched her in the face last week and told you, point blank, that I was the Arrow?” He said with a raised eyebrow. “No reason, she just blurted it out over appetizers?”

“She offered me a job at Stellmoor based on the fact that I was your tech for Team Arrow. She actually said the words, ‘I know that Oliver is the Arrow’. So yeah, she just blurted it out. But not over appetizers, she saved it for the end of the meal.” She added.

“She offered you a job? Isabel?” Oliver laughed. “Right.” He sighed and sat on the edge of her workstation, “She was obviously lying.”

“No, she wasn’t,” she said slowly. “Oliver, you have to believe me—“

“You should know better than to believe anything she said to you, Felicity,” Oliver said in a condescending manner. “It’s obvious that she was just playing a game of cat and mouse with you as payback for the other day.” He straightened his back and focused on her more alertly, “You didn’t accidently confirm anything she said did you?”

Felicity took a moment to remove her jacket and toss her bag into the chair in front of her monitoring post angrily before speaking. She turned to him and pushed her glasses off the bridge of her nose with her middle finger. And yes, she thought at him, that was deliberate. “I know better than to just blurt out your secrets, Oliver! I’m not an idiot.”

“I’m not saying you’re an idiot,” Oliver told her evenly. “However, you and I both know you have a tendency to babble a bit when you get nervous and Isabel tends to put you on edge.”

“I was not babbling and I was not on edge!” She said sharply before muttering to herself, “Until she hit on me and then I may have babbled a little bit.”

“She hit you?” Oliver asked, his face darkening slightly as he straightened his spine and seemed to zero on her face as though looking for injuries.

“No, she didn’t hit me,” she let out a noise of exasperation. “I said she hit on me; as in made a pass at me.”

Oliver’s face widened into a huge grin and he chuckled a bit as he relaxed. He ran his hand over his mouth and tilted his head toward the ceiling, scratching at his ever present stubble as he did so. “Diggle is going to be so disappointed that I gave him the night off when he hears about this.”

“This isn’t funny!” Felicity scowled at him, her temper quickly beginning to escalate.

He tilted his head and gave her another grin, “It’s a little funny.”

“Oliver, I’m serious,” she said insistently. “Isabel knows about you. She said that Stellmoor International is more than just some evil Vulture Capitalist Corporate Raider Conglomerate, it’s a worldwide organization that has a particular interest in people like you.” She frowned and shook her head, “She also said a few other things that struck me as odd—“

“Of course she said a few things that struck you as being odd, she was lying,” Oliver said wryly.

She threw her hands up in exasperation, waving them about in emphasis. “She wasn’t lying! She knew everything; she even knew about—”

He moved close to her, grabbed her hands, and held them still. “Felicity, she was lying,” he said
calmly as he looked down at her. “She was just trying to play some kind of mind game, she’s good at that, but I know for a fact that she was lying to you.”

Felicity scowled, “How do you know?”

He released her hands and leaned against the desk again. “Well, for one thing, I definitely know she’s not a lesbian.”

“And why’s that? Because you slept with her once?” She asked, cocking a superior eyebrow in his direction.

He crossed his arms across his chest and continued to look smug. “As a matter of fact, yes; and, trust me, she’s definitely not gay.”

“Sara—“ she began.

“Sara had one serious girlfriend,” he broke in. “One. I’m not saying she never messed around with other women while we were together but, believe me, there’s a big difference between a woman who sometimes colors outside the lines but still genuinely enjoys sex with men and someone who’s putting on a show. Trust me, Isabel wasn’t faking it.”

Dumb ass! Felicity wanted to shout but instead she said, “First off, you might want to call Sara before you start spewing out numbers because, trust me, I’ve been there when she’s six shots into a bottle of the good stuff and it’s been waay more than just the one. As for Isabel and the gaydar detector in your pants; haven’t you ever heard of the Kinsey scale or is your he-man ‘I’m a stud’ ego just that big?” She pulled a disgusted face. “News flash, Romeo: Human sexuality is a sliding scale. Women can identify as lesbian and still find men attractive. From what she told me, I’d say Isabel’s a four; bisexual but with a strong preference for women.” She shot him a filthy look, “Believe it or not, Oliver; my time is still valuable and I don’t have time to sit here and stroke your ego all night long. I’m telling you the truth, make of it what you will; I don’t care anymore.”

“Is that right?” Oliver said, seemingly unimpressed.

“That’s right,” she told him.

“Well, my time is pretty valuable, too. Sorry if I kept you waiting but I still have a job; two of them in fact,” he said with a confident grin. “Speaking of which, if you want to hear my theory as to why you’re really here, it’s not because you think Isabel’s a threat; it’s because you want to come back but you’re too embarrassed to admit it.”

“You’re full of crap!” She snapped at him.

“Am I?” He asked, arching an eyebrow in her direction. “You quit just the other day and yet this is the second time you’ve shown up at the Lair under some pretense or another. And, FYI, if you’re that interested in what is or isn’t in my pants I can promise you it wasn’t just my ego you were stroking while we were in the conference room.”

She flushed hotly at the reminder of what had happened between them and glared, “While I hate to interrupt this commentary on your sexual prowess, were you even listening when I told you that she knows you’re the Arrow? That she probably has had you followed for some time? That there may be some sort of way for her to intercept our transmissions? No. You just focused on making fun of me and ignoring everything else.” She snatched her jacket and purse off the chair, “Look, if you don’t want to take me seriously, then fine! I’ll handle it on my own.”

She headed for the stairs with him trailing after her.
“Felicity, you know you can’t actually empty her bank accounts, right?” He said in a slightly bored yet indulgent tone. “She was just trying to get your goat.”

She whirled on him, her finger poking him in the chest. “First off, I most certainly could go all kinds of cyber-vigilante on her if I chose, but I won’t. For once she’s not the one being an ass; you are. Keep that in mind as you continue to piss me off!” She snapped.

He sighed in exasperation, “Look, I realized Isabel might have scared you with her little prank but you need to take a breath and think it through: Isabel has been with the company for two years now; why would she wait that long to reveal something like that and to you of all people?” He took a step towards her, “Felicity, if you want to come back we can work this out but Isabel isn’t a threat, I promise you.”

“I’m telling you the truth!” She said angrily. “She wasn’t just playing a prank, she was dead serious, but since you refuse to see it then I have no choice but to either handle this myself or go to an outside source for help. You’re not the only one who could be affected by this kind of security breech!”

That got his attention, “What ‘outside source’?”

“You know what Oliver, just don’t worry about it,” she said with a sigh, the fight leaving her. “I’m done. Sorry I wasted your time.”

She turned to walk away but he grabbed her arm and pulled her back, speaking in a low growl, “You are not to go to Batman with this, do you hear me?”

She snatched her arm back and glared up at him, “Don’t grab at me and don’t tell me what I can or can’t do, I don’t work for you anymore. That said, I wasn’t planning on going directly to him but to one of his associates. Believe it or not I do have other means at my disposal other than you.”

“No, you’re not going to go to anyone about this, do you hear me?” He said, getting very close and looming over her intimidatingly. “Especially not to someone associated with Batman. You may not work for me anymore but this is my city and my business.”

She shook her head at him and her eyes reflected the disappointment she was feeling at that moment, “You know, I would have gone to the ends of the Earth for you not so long ago. I did things for you that I never imagined I was even capable of doing—I jumped out of a plane and landed in a minefield just to convince you to come home so you could be the Arrow!” She dropped her eyes to the floor, no longer able to even look at him. “I’ve done and I’ve done and I never asked you for anything, not once, and the one time I do, the one time I ask you to show some faith in me, just hear me out, you can’t even do that. You don’t believe me, fine. Like I said, I’m a big girl; I’ll figure it out.” She headed up the stairs. “Goodbye Oliver.”

“Can you blame me, Felicity?” Oliver said angrily from the bottom of the stairs. “Why should I have faith in anything you have to say when I found out a few days ago that you’ve been lying to me this whole time?”

She spared him one last glance, “Have a good life, Oliver Queen.” And left.

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When Felicity got home the first thing she did after stepping over the remains of her toaster and the broken bottle of wine was head to her ‘closet’ and hang up her new outfits. She had to do a bit of shoving and rearranging to get them in there. For a split second she thought about heading out in the morning to the big hardware store downtown to pick up some more of the rolling garment racks that
filled the entire room before she remembered she was supposed to be moving out that weekend.

She glanced around the space skeptically. There was no way she could do this by herself. Note to self, she thought, call around and see if any of the moving companies in the area offered packing services as well. It would cost more but it would be worth it.

She headed out of the ‘closet room’ and into her bedroom where she stripped down the bed to change her sheets that still smelled like Bruce and briefly considered tossing them in her fireplace. It was tempting but smashing a $40 bottle of wine and a coffee mug was one thing, setting her favorite 1500 tread-count Egyptian cotton sheets on fire was another. She shoved them down into the hamper, took off her dress and hung it to go with the rest of her dry cleaning in the morning, then headed for the tub.

She soaked until her fingers and toes got prune-y, refreshing the cooling water with hot as she went. Her little bungalow had its faults with the drafty walls and the huge windows that, while charming, let in all kinds of light at the butt crack of dawn (she had become a big fan of black-out curtains), but she’d miss this. Lucius lived in a penthouse at Wayne Towers and it was beautiful, modern, and comfortable, but it lacked the charm of her shabby-chic little house. There would be no pipes rattling in the middle of the night, no water spots on the ceiling marring the crown moldings and ornate plaster, no scarred claw-footed tubs. Not that she didn’t enjoy modern conveniences; she was a techie after all and loved her gadgets, but this had been her first place and she’d miss the freedom it provided.

She spent her tub time flitting between melancholy, regret, Isabel’s revelations, and the more practical concerns of moving before finally giving up and deciding it was time to get dressed in her warm and fuzzies and start putting her house to rights. She tugged on the thick chenille robe her dad had given her for her birthday and headed for her bedroom.

She loved the long fuzzy oversized robe that she could easily wrap around herself twice over with its embroidered polka-dot cats and steaming coffee mugs. She had a few of the whimsical plush robes. She’d been a big fan of The Nanny when she was younger, one of the few non-sci-fi shows she enjoyed, and she, Tam, and their dad would all sit in front of the television and laugh whenever it came on while Luke moaned and groaned even though he secretly enjoyed it as well. He made a point of getting her and her sister a new robe every year since they left home as a reminder of their nights spent watching movies or Nick at Nite, drinking hot cups of cocoa, and snacking from big bowls of popcorn on the coffee table. She stroked the soft material on her lapel with a little bit of melancholy and wondered briefly if she could catch an episode or two before bed.

She went straight to the old fashioned steam trunk style chest at the foot of her bed to pull out a fresh set of sheets then turned to her large ornate chest of drawers for some pajamas. As she turned she caught some movement from the corner of her eye and screamed, her heart thumping in her chest. As soon as she was able to focus she yelled, “Goddamn it, Oliver! What the hell??!”

“Sorry,” he said, although his relaxed pose in her bedroom doorway said different. “I wanted to talk to you some more and I knocked but you didn’t answer. I was just going to leave a note but then I saw the mess.” He frowned and hitched his thumb at the living room, “What happened out there? Did someone break in or something?”

“Sort of,” she scowled. “Speaking of breaking in, I have a security system on my door.”

“You’re not the only one who can hack a keypad,” he shot back a bit too smugly for her tastes. “I checked the other rooms just in case after I saw all the glass and broken stuff. By the way; your guestroom?” He moved into the room further, his hands in his trouser pockets as he arched an eyebrow at her. “Wow. And I thought Thea was a shop-a-holic.”
She gave him her best ‘go to hell’ look grabbing the pillows on her bed angrily as she shoved them into the fresh cases then tossed them on the overstuffed chaise lounge by the window. “Just say what you have to say and go, Oliver. It may seem pretty early to you but I’m tired and I still have a lot to do before I can go to bed tonight.”

She began to unfold the sheets and Oliver wandered over to the other side, his eyes downcast and looking a bit guilty. “Need help with that?”

“I didn’t think boys with trust funds the size of yours made beds,” Felicity said a bit facetiously.

He threw her an amused look, “So says the daughter of one of the greatest financial geniuses in the world? Are you telling me you don’t have a trust fund squirreled away somewhere--and before you answer that keep in mind I saw the guest bedroom.”

“Fine!” She pouted, tossing him the other corner of the sheets as they tucked them under the corners, working in tandem. “For the record though, I’ve never touched it—my trust. Everything I have I earned all on my own.”

“I didn’t realize QC paid that well,” Oliver snorted as he pulled the sheets tight before tucking the bottom corner.

She stopped and placed her hands on her hips. “For your information, I had a life before I came here. I sold some software I developed before I was hired on---it’s half of the reason I got the job to begin with.” She folded her arms over her chest with a frown, “Wait, have you ever even read my file?”

“Of course I did.” He paused, catching her expression of disbelief, “Well, no, I never actually got around to it.” Oliver said before grinning sheepishly at her disgruntled huff, “I already knew everything I needed to know about you, okay? I trusted you so I didn’t really care what some file said; I already knew all I needed to.”

She unfolded the top sheet and muttered, “Trust, right.”

He snagged the other corners of the sheet and pulled them over to his side. “Yeah, I actually came over tonight to apologize.” He tucked in the bottom of the sheets and looked up at her, his eyes filled with remorse. “I’m sorry for being an ass. I should have listened.”

She looked over at him, her anger deflating, and motioned toward the duvet. “Help me fluff the covers, okay?”

“Fluff?” He smiled, a genuine one and not one of the all too frequent practiced smiles he saved for the rest of the world. “That a technical term?”

“Just fluff,” she ordered. They snapped the duvet between them until it floated gracefully onto the sheets. It had always been her favorite part of making the bed, that magical little moment when the covers seemed to hang in the air like a parachute before covering the entire bed in a whisper soft puff of air. It was weird but it always made her smile. She looked over at Oliver and noticed he was staring at her, his eyes fixed on her chest. He quickly looked away and she blushed crimson when she realized why. Her robe had loosened and it was open almost to her navel.

She tightened it quickly as he cleared his throat. “So,” he said, “Um, software development, huh? I’m not exactly a fashion guy but even I could tell that you must have done pretty well for yourself.”

“It was just a few programs, nothing big,” she shrugged, willing her embarrassment away. “I mean, I was probably overpaid but Bruce has deep pockets, so—”
“Wait, Bruce?” He said cutting her off. “As in Bruce Wayne? You worked for WayneTech?”

“No, not exactly,” she said clearing her throat. “I just consulted for Bruce on a few private projects after MIT.”

“Is that all there was between you two?”

“What?” She looked up at him, her embarrassment giving way to anger once again.

His eyes were hooded and the lines around his mouth had deepened into the beginnings of a scowl. “Not that it’s any of my business or anything but I saw the way he acted toward you the other day, not to mention the way you kept trying to avoid him.” His eyes locked onto hers and something dark and deadly flitted across his eyes. “Wait, he didn’t do anything to you, did he? Harass you or hurt you?” He seemed to pause over the word ‘hurt’. “Is that why you moved here from Gotham?”

“No!” Felicity said quickly then paused, “Well, yes, but not in the way you’re implying.” She pushed her rapidly drying and slightly frizzy blonde hair from her eyes and sat on the bed heavily. “It’s a long story.”

“So tell it,” Oliver said in a far too casual to be believed tone.

“No, absolutely not,” Felicity said, playing with a loose thread on her robe.

“You’re the one who said I never ask you anything personal,” he pointed out.

“There’s personal and then there’s personal.”

Oliver moved closer to her to stand at the foot of the bed. He bumped her knees with his and offered a wry twitch of the corners of his mouth, hitching a thumb at his chest, “My longtime girlfriend asked me to move in and I responded by sleeping with her sister, and running away to China—or I intended to anyway; the whole five years spent on an island hell was kind of a karmic kick in the teeth, but still. The point is that you know all of my fucked up crap and I don’t know any of yours, so talk.”

“We really should be talking about Isabel,” she pointed out in an attempt to dodge the conversation.

“We will, but first I want to, I don’t know, establish a baseline or something.” He sighed, sitting down next to her. He reached for her hand and squeezed it reassuringly. “I trust you, I do, but you’ve got to show me you can let go of some of your secrets first. Not all of them, but something easy. Too many people in my life have kept secrets and I need to, I don’t know; get back to normal with you before I can relax again.”

Oliver was not a words kind of guy so, when he admitted that, it pretty much blew every argument she had out of the water. She shut her eyes, her cheeks already stained red, and dove right in. “Okay. Well,” she began as she struggled to figure out the best way to tell him without giving away too many of the more important details, “It was nothing really. I was barely 19 and I’d never even been out on a date much less kissed a guy or anything—“

“Wait,” he said stopping her, “How is that possible? You were 19 and had never gone out with anybody? By the time I was nineteen…” He let his voice trail off with a naughty gleam in his eye. “Let’s just say I was a very busy guy.”

She raised her eyes to his ruefully, “Not all of us were as precocious as you. Besides, I started college when I was barely thirteen years old and my brother and I shared an apartment because my dad didn’t want me staying by myself at MIT; especially after some creepy Lacrosse player decided
to get all stalker-y my freshman year. And Luke, well, he can be a bit overprotective.”

“Lacrosse player?” Oliver asked, a hint of the Arrow coming through. “Why would a grown man stalk a thirteen year old girl?”

“I was fourteen by then,” she shrugged. “It was during the summer session so I had just had my birthday. Not that it matters to the story, but I wanted to graduate early so I was packing in the hours and, apparently, it was slim pickings on campus during that time of year, I guess.”

“Slim pickings?” He said with a deepening scowl.

“Yeah, it was some stupid frat game,” she said dismissively, although at the time it had scared her. “I don’t think he actually knew I was only fourteen at the time. I mean, I looked young, that was obvious, but I think he figured that just meant I’d be a pushover and he was trying to score as many points as he could.”

The truth was that her mother’s reputation had apparently followed her. Sebastian ‘Trip’ Hady III (otherwise known by the pithy frat name Trip ‘Get Laid-y’ Hady), the boy in question, had family in Gotham and he figured the apple didn’t fall far from the tree but she wasn’t going to tell him that. Some things were still too private.

“Points?” Oliver bit out.

“Yeah,” she said closing her eyes at the memory, “the frat had this thing called a ‘cherry picking’—“

“I’m familiar with the term,” Oliver said grimly. “What happened to the lacrosse player?”

“Well, let’s just say that after Luke got finished with him he wasn’t playing lacrosse anymore,” she said ruefully. ‘Also the frat got shut down as a result of their ‘game’. It…didn’t exactly make me popular with the Greeks. Nobody ever messed with me again though.”

“I think I like your brother,” Oliver said at last. “Is he your only sibling?”

“No,” she gave him an incredulous look. “You didn’t even look into Lucius’s background before the meeting either?”

He shrugged, “Didn’t have time.”

“You spend hours preparing for a mission and you can’t take five minutes to skim some research at work?”

He looked at her askance, “I dropped out of four different colleges; this surprises you?”

Felicity took a deep breath and sighed, “You drive me insane, you know that? Okay, so I have a brother and a sister; technically they’re my stepsiblings since they’re from his first marriage but Lucius helped raise me since I was just a few months old and adopted me before I was two so we’ve never split hairs. Luke used to be with the Peace Corps but now he works for The Wayne International Charity Foundation in Africa; he runs a program in Tinasha, that’s in the Congo, educating kids.”

“From MIT to the Peace Corps to the Congo running a charity? That’s admirable but a bit of an odd career trajectory isn’t it?”

“Yeah, well, Dad wasn’t all that happy with the idea at first. He graduated a year early from MIT with a job offer from Wayne Enterprises working directly with Dad but he turned it down. Sitting
behind a desk or spending time in a lab just wasn’t his thing. He’s always been very physical and active, always more of an engineer than a software geek like me. As kids we’d design stuff and he’d put it together. He joined the Peace Corps because the idea of helping people appealed to him as well as the labor intensive stuff like building bridges and schools, he liked the hands-on thing and he apparently loves teaching. It’s weird because he was never the most patient guy in the world but he’s happy and he sends me updates every once in a while along with requests for treats to give to his students.” She smiled, “Hey, wait,” she reached over to her nightstand and showed him a picture of her brother in a silver frame surrounded by a bunch of barefoot and slightly dusty and sweaty kids who had obviously been playing a rousing game of soccer if the ball in Luke’s hand was any indication.

“That’s your brother?” Oliver said in surprise as he examined the picture before handing it back to her, “Pretty buff guy for a school teacher.”

She smiled and put it back on her nightstand, “Yeah, well, like I said; he’s always been a physical kind of person. He did a lot of kickboxing and mixed martial arts in college. It helps because he really got involved in helping the child soldiers down there, providing education and protection. He doesn’t say it but I know things can get pretty dangerous in that part of the world. Along with the basics he teaches the kids martial arts and self-defense. He says it helps them focus, teaches them discipline, and directs their aggression into something constructive. When David Zavimbe, the former Director, resigned from the Foundation Bruce offered the job to Luke. He been down there for a few years now and I really don’t think he’ll ever leave; he loves it too much.”

Oliver smiled at her, his eyes lighter and softer than they’ve been in a long time, “He sounds like a really great guy.”

“She is,” she said with a bright smile. “You know, growing up we never fought. He and Tam used to go at it like cats and dogs but…I don’t know, they were always my whole world. I was always especially close to Luke. I mean, Tam and I are close, don’t get me wrong, but Luke was my hero growing up. He still kind of is,” she said, glancing at the photo again.

“I wish I had that sometimes,” Oliver said with a contemplative look. “I always wished I had an older brother, someone to look up to. It would have been nice to have someone there to turn to or just to call me on my shit when I messed up, you know? Not like my parents, not in a judgmental ‘you’re screwing up and embarrassing the family name’ kind of way; just someone who had already been there and who could help me to get through it when I needed someone to rely on.”

“You had Tommy,” she pointed out.

“Not really,” he said with a slightly sheepish grin, “Tommy and I were like brothers, yeah, but he wasn’t my hero; we were more like partners in crime.”

She laughed, “Yeah, that’s me and Tam. Every adventurous thing I ever did was because of her. I mean everything. She’s a total instigator. She took me to get my ears pierced when I was twelve and my dad about had a fit when I came home with five holes in each ear.”

“I’ll bet!” He grinned, “Is she the one responsible for the tattoo?”

She lifted her foot and looked down at the girlish cursive along her instep that said ‘Dream Big’, “Yep; she took me to the tattoo parlor just before she left for La Fémis after Sarah Lawrence. She even got me my first fake ID so we could get in because I was underage. The place was a total hellhole smack dab in the middle of the worst part of town, and I’m lucky I didn’t contract Hepatitis from the tattoo needle, but at the time the only thing I was upset about was the fact that they didn’t even bother checking it. I spent two whole days watching Fargo and memorizing my fake birthday
because of that stupid ID.”

“Fargo?” He asked in confusion.

“The movie,” she clarified. “For some reason the guy who made the fake ID gave us Minnesota driver’s licenses and I wanted to have the accent right, just in case.”

He laughed; one of his rare laughs that brightened his whole expression and shaved years of pain from his face. “Your sister sounds like a trip.”

Felicity smiled, “Tam? Oh man, Tam is the best. She’s the oldest so she’s always been leader of the pack and the rest of us just fall in line. She’s fantastic: smart, wicked sense of humor, fearless really. She speaks five languages fluently, is incredibly sharp, and can kick some serious butt if you piss her off. She works at Wayne Enterprises in the Entertainment Division and really seems to enjoy it.”

“So everyone but you works for Wayne in your family?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t Wayne offer you a job there as well?” He asked, his tone casual but his eyes were sharp.

“He did, so did Dad. I just wanted to do something on my own,” she said, not looking at him directly. The truth was she couldn’t have survived working day after day in the same building as Bruce after what had happened but she didn’t want to say that. He broke her heart and even though the job at QC was entry level, she was more concerned with distance than prestige or money when she accepted it.

Oliver gave her a puzzled look, “Can I ask you something before you tell me your undoubtedly tragic and humiliating Bruce Wayne story?”

“I love the way you phrased that,” she muttered. “Go ahead.” She prepared herself for one of a thousand questions he could ask her like, ‘Why did you say your dad abandoned your family if you consider Lucius to be your dad?’ ‘Why didn’t you wait for a position in Applied Sciences instead of taking the first thing available in IT?’ or ‘Why not accept a job closer to home at AmerTech or LexCorp in Metropolis?’.

“If Lucius is your dad and he raised you then how are you Jewish?”

That was a bit out of left field, she thought. She looked at him askance, “You do know that black people can be Jewish, right? Black people, Asian people, Latin people, Indian people, anyone can be Jewish; the twelve tribes are nothing if not diverse.” He squinted at her slightly in the same way he did at the office when he was pretending to understand something that was completely foreign to him like computers or pop culture references. She narrowed her eyes and gave him her best, ‘you’re not fooling me’ look. “Judaism isn’t just an ethnicity; it’s a religion, a nationality, and a culture as well and converts have the same standing within the mainstream Jewish community as someone who is considered an ‘ethnic’ Jew.” At his blank look she sighed, “Lenny Kravitz is Jewish, Oliver.”

“Um, sure. Yeah, I knew that,” Oliver said unconvincingly.

The corners of her lips quirked upwards as she noticed the slight flush on the usually unflappable man’s cheeks and decided to let him off the hook for once, “Lucius’s first wife was of mixed heritage and Jewish so he converted for her and then he met my mom who was Jewish as well. That said we weren’t very observant, just the High Holidays, and we had a Menorah and a Hanukah bush that tended to stay up until Christmas so there might have been a little wiggle room here and there. The
Hanukah bush/Jewish Christmas thing started when Tam made the argument that since at least part of our heritage was Christian, even if Lucius had converted years ago, we should do both. Mostly though it was just because she liked getting presents and Lucius just went with it that way Tam and Luke could do Hanukah with his first wife’s family and Jewish Christmas with us,” she added. “Trust me, none of us were complaining.”

“Got it,” he nodded. “Okay, now that I’ve managed to completely embarrass myself by exposing my lack of cultural knowledge, it’s your turn. I’m ready for you to tell me all about your totally humiliating sexual awakening.”

“Oh God…” Felicity’s eyes practically bugged out of her skull and her tongue seemed to swell like she’d just pigged out on one of those monster tubs of peanut butter she saw at the Price Club last time she went shopping for supplies.

“Hey, I just put my foot in my mouth and practically admitted that the only thing I know about Jewish people is that they’re good with numbers and that Jerry Seinfeld is funny as hell,” he said blithely. “It’s the least you can do.”

“Really? Jewish accountant jokes?” Felicity asked, her jaw practically hitting the floor.

“Are we going for honesty or political correctness because you get one or the other but not both,” he drawled.

She closed her eyes and prayed for lightening to strike her. “I can’t believe I’m telling you this,” she muttered before taking a calming breath. “There’s really not much to it: I was 19, I was working on a special project for him, it was late, one thing led to another, blah blah blah.” She shrugged and played with the ends of the tie holding her robe together nervously as she avoided his gaze. “It was one weekend and then on Monday he basically said, ‘thanks for the sex, hope you enjoyed it, and here’s some cab fare’ and then I moved to Starling City a week later.”

“Cab fare, huh?” he said with a ghost of a smile. “I bet he just pulled out his wallet and asked ‘how much’ after he was done.”

“Better than that; he left it on the night stand after he got dressed.”

“Nice,” Oliver snickered.

“Really,” she agreed her cheeks almost the same shade of dark pink as her robe. “He even threw in a tip for the driver.”

“Ouch,” he winced with a grin then looked up at the ceiling scratching the stubble on his neck in a familiar gesture. “I can’t say much; I’ve done that and worse and didn’t even say ‘thanks’ or offer cab fare when I was done.”

“Well, since you two are charter members of The Billionaire Playboy Club, I’m not surprised,” she said ruefully.

“Hey, at least he didn’t knock you up, ruin your life, then have his mother pay you off, right?” He said. The words were said jokingly but she could hear the edge of self-hatred in his voice.

“It’s not too late to have a relationship with Connor, Oliver,” she reminded him for the umpteenth time. “Merlyn is dead. You could call Waller, have her send them a message…”

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “I can’t, not now. Maybe later when he’s older but right now he deserves to have an uncomplicated life, you know? It’s bad enough that he and Sandy
had to leave their entire lives behind them because of Merlyn, I just want him to have a chance to be a kid and not have to deal with any of this.” He smiled tightly, “Besides, this is about you and me, remember? Connor…he’s a discussion for another day.”

“Fair enough,” she said dropping it, then looked over at him. “Is it my turn to ask questions now?”

He looked at her cautiously, “What do you want to ask?”

“Nothing bad,” she assured him. “It’s just that you’re always doing this,” she mimed the scratching of his stubble gesture, “thing; have you ever considered just shaving?”

“What? And shave off my manly stubble?” He asked in mock horror before shrugging, “I don’t know, I guess it’s my way of holding onto that little bit of the old Ollie. I mean, I’m running my dad’s company and I have to hide what I do as the Arrow from everyone, keeping the scruffy beard is my little way of thumbing my nose at the whole three piece suits and boardroom thing. Besides, the ladies dig it,” he grinned. “Makes me look like a bad boy who just needs the right woman to help him change his wicked ways.”

She couldn’t help but roll her eyes at that. “You know, I could go on and on about the psychological theories behind why most politicians and businessmen believe a clean-shaven look makes them appear to be more open and trustworthy whereas a beard implies they have something to hide and then go on this whole tangent about what your uncommitted beard thing says about you, but I won’t. Instead I’ll just clue you in on the fact that, FYI, most women don’t like getting beard burn when they kiss a guy so you might want to rethink that.”

“I don’t know,” he said softly as he looked into her eyes, “I’ve never gotten any complaints.” She shifted nervously and he cleared his throat. “So.”

“So,” she repeated.

“Well, at least Wayne is in your past and you’ve moved on since then, right? That’s something.”

She swallowed and stared down at her bare feet. “Right, yeah, totally.”

He frowned a little, an inquisitive look lighting up his expression once more, “Well, I mean, you’ve dated plenty of guys since then, I’m sure.”

She gave a bark of laughter at that, “What guys? How many ‘guys’ have you seen me date since you’ve known me?”

“Well,” he seemed to think about it carefully, “there was Barry.”

She nodded sadly, “Yeah, Barry; Barry who I shared all of one dance with and an exciting night of saving you from stroking out in the Lair.” She shook her head ruefully, “Some love affair; we never even held hands much less kissed. On our ‘second date’, the one where he had to shoot you full of rat poison, he told me we could ‘be friends’ then went home where he was hit by lightning and spent months in a coma. Then, after weeks of me going to visit his bedside, he woke up as the Flash, had a new girlfriend he got together with while he was still in the coma, said ‘thanks for being there’, and left to do the whole superhero thing in Central City.”

“Oh,” Oliver said uncomfortably.

“Yeah, ‘oh’,” she snorted.

“Daniel?” He said, although not enthusiastically.
“You mean the other billionaire vigilante who was using me just to get close to you?” She said dubiously.

“Yeah well, I never really thought that guy was good enough for you anyway,” Oliver muttered then paused. “Wait, what do you mean the ‘other’ billionaire vigilante?”

She froze, “Um, just that you’re a billionaire vigilante and Daniel was a billionaire vigilante so that means you’re, um, the other billionaire vigilante…” She let her voice trail off weakly.

“Okay, I guess so,” he shrugged then scowled again, “I hated that guy. He was such a—”

“Asshole,” she supplied then thought better of it, “No, actually he was a nice guy, he just had his own mission and went about things the wrong way.”

He smirked, “No, you were right the first time; Garret was an asshole for using you like that and, for the record, I never trusted him. I kept trying to tell you something was off with him but you wouldn’t listen.”

“And your point is?”

He smirked, “That, for once, I was right and you were wrong.”

“Really?” She said looking at him askance, “You’re choosing now to rub my nose in that?”

“You never apologized for calling me a territorial asshat after I followed you guys to the restaurant.”

“That’s because you were being a territorial asshat,” she said dryly.

“No, I was trying to protect you because I could tell that something was off about that guy and it turned out I was right,” he said defensively.

“He was a mask, not a creepy supervillain with a mind control cocktail in his pocket,” she said with a snort.

“But he could have been,” Oliver said with a scowl. “The chemicals did come from his labs after all; you just don’t want to admit that I was right when I said he was hiding something.”

“Okay, you were right,” Felicity told him in exasperation. “Happy now?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Oliver said with a twinkle in his eyes.

She snorted, “God, you’ve been waiting a year just to hear me say that, haven’t you?”

“I have; yes,” he admitted. “I also never thought Barry was a right fit for you either. Don’t get me wrong, he’s a nice guy, but if he was really into you he wouldn’t have hooked up with Iris the first chance he got.”

“Yeah, well…” She said dourly.

He paused, “Plus, if you ask me, he’s also got a thing going on with that little lab assistant chick, what’s her name.”

“Caitlin?” She asked incredulously.

“Yeah; her,” he frowned. “Frankly something’s off with her, too. I can’t put my finger on it but—”—
“First off, Caitlin isn’t a ‘lab assistant’, she’s a biochemist. Secondly, there’s nothing going on between her and Barry,” she told him flatly.

“Yes, there is,” he said confidently.

“How do you know?” She asked in exasperation.

“Oh, I know,” he said with a slight upturning of his lips. “And, trust me, when that whole thing blows up in his face you don’t want to be anywhere near it.”

“They just work together,” she snorted.

“Yeah, like I said; complete disaster just waiting to happen,” he smirked. “I almost feel sorry for the poor bastard. Love triangles always end in disaster, especially when all of the parties involved are also teammates.”

“Kind of like when Laurel decided to try out Sara’s wig and go leaping from rooftop to rooftop with you guys as the new Canary and then when Sara came back you hooked up with her again leading to a huge catfight all because you couldn’t keep your Arrow in your pants?” She shot back.

“Yeah, like that,” he said looking at her with a pained grimace. “Ouch; talk about a low blow, but yeah, like that,” he said with a wince. “The point is, neither of those guys were good enough for you. You told me once that I deserve better, well; so do you.”

“Maybe,” she said quietly.

“No maybe about it,” he said, laying his hand on hers and squeezing slightly before pulling away. “You’re remarkable, remember? You deserve someone just as remarkable as you are.”

“Remarkable, right,” she scoffed, “because a guy who can travel at superhuman speeds is too humdrum for someone as utterly extraordinary as me.”

“Exactly,” Oliver said with firm assurance.

She sighed, “Look, I know that Barry and I might not have worked out and it wasn’t meant to be but, thing is, I liked him. He was funny, and he was safe, and we spoke the same language. He might not have been all that handsome or exciting compared to…” she glanced up at him before clearing her throat, “some people before the whole ‘Flash’ thing, but I liked having someone interested in me for a change. Of course, once he meta’d out, all that changed. Before it just felt like I was being left behind in a cloud of dust; then Barry got zapped and, well…” She expelled a discontented breath, “I don’t know; I guess I’m just cursed. I should just give up; it’s not like anyone’s interested in me anyway, right? Unless, of course, you count random psychopaths or masked vigilantes with intimacy issues and then, boy howdy, is my dance card full.”

“Plenty of people find you interesting,” he defended, ignoring the directed ‘intimacy issues’ remark.

“Then why was he was the first guy--the only guy--to ask me out in four years? And notice, I’m not including Daniel because he was a hell of a lot more interested in you than he was in me. Don’t think I’m ever getting over that one either; at least when Barry asked me out, he was actually interested in me and not in the Arrow. Well, he was interested in the Arrow, but he was more interested in me.” She frowned, “No wait, he didn’t ask me out; you asked him out for me, remember?” She reminded him. “Crap. Technically speaking he was the only guy I ever really dated at all and he dumped me less than twenty-four hours into our relationship, plus he was basically a...oh God, it was some kind of weird pity date by proxy, wasn’t it? How did I not notice that before?”
“A what?” Oliver asked in confusion.

She ignored him, “I don’t know; maybe I should just go the bad 80’s movie route and build my own man-bot. Of course, he’d probably just dump me for the toaster oven,” she added under her breath.

“Felicity, you’re gorgeous, you know that right?” He asked with a puzzled frown as though her beauty were merely a fact.

“I’m somewhat attractive in the sense that I have symmetrical features and clean up nice,” she corrected him. “At best I’m pretty, as in, sweet old fashioned girl next door pretty.”

“Yes, you are,” he told her. “Very pretty.”

She smiled, “Thanks, but my kind of pretty isn’t exactly what most guys are looking for these days. I mean, we live in the plastic surgery capital of the world where everyone expects you to be this statuesque epitome of female beauty with big fake boobs and I’m too…well, not perfect; like the complete opposite of perfect. Totally imperfect.”

“That’s not true,” he told her. “When have you ever seen me with a plasticized human bouncy house?”

“You have a point,” she admitted ruefully, “but trust me when I say that you’re the exception to the rule. Besides, you have your own weird thing going on with tall, willowy brunettes.”

“I do not,” He objected.

“You so do,” she snorted.

“Sara was blonde,” he pointed out in self-defense.

“She was the exception to the rule as well,” she said dryly. “Besides, you and Sara have that whole superhero thing going on and I’m just…” She sighed then shrugged, “I don’t know; girls like me just don’t inspire passion. I’m too short, too nerdy, too ‘cute’, too,” she looked down at her modestly proportioned chest and raised her eyebrows slightly, “you know. The first thing most people tell me, if they notice me at all, is ‘You’re cute’, or ‘Aren’t you just adorable?’ Newsflash; adorable is worlds away from sexy. Don’t ask me why, but I give off this vibe that reminds them of their little sisters—I know this because I get told that constantly.” She said with a resigned grimace.

“I don’t think of you as my little sister,” Oliver said with a deepening frown.

She gave him a dubious look, “Yeah, well, maybe not since ‘the dress thing’,” she emphasized by curling her fingers into air quotes, “but you kind of did before that.” He started to protest and she cut him off, “It’s okay, Diggle does the same thing; most people do. For some reason men take one look at me and assume I’m some fragile little thing and having any kind of romantic interest in me makes them into some kind of pervert. I’m pretty much used to it and on the rare occasion someone does decide to pay me any sort of ‘attention’ all I have to do is open my big mouth and they’re out of there.”

“That’s not true,” he said firmly. “I’ve seen plenty of men give you a second look, Felicity. You just haven’t noticed.”

“It is true; believe me, I’ve seen the skid marks on the floor when they make their escape after I go into full ramble mode.” Felicity shrugged half-heartedly. “Look, this whole ‘cheer up Felicity’ thing you’re trying to do is nice but it really doesn’t bother me,” she said with a stiff smile. “I’ve known for a very long time now that I just wasn’t meant to have something like that with another person. I have
my work, the mission, you guys…” She closed her eyes with a wince, her chin dropping to her chest, “Oh yeah, almost forgot. Guess I don’t have any of that anymore,” she muttered.

“Felicity…” his voice was pained but she refused to look up at him.

She forced a smile on her face, her eyes still cast downwards, “‘Seriously, you don’t have to build up my self-esteem or worry about it. I’ll be fine. I’ll just finish packing up my house and go home to Gotham; find a job, get a condo and a couple of cats. Maybe I’ll take up knitting or something. I always wanted to learn how to do that and now that I won’t be hacking into the FBI database all night long I might actually have time for hobbies again.”

She thought he’d laugh and drop it but instead he tilted her head up so she was looking into his eyes as he spoke, “Don’t do that.”

“The knitting or the cats?” She asked jokingly.

“Don’t put yourself down; don’t try to convince yourself that you deserve less, or that you aren’t worthy of having something because you are the best, brightest, bravest person I know,” he said seriously. “And, for the record, you still have me and I think you’re beautiful. Or couldn’t you tell how I felt about you from the other day?”

She gave a slightly nervous chuckle, pointedly trying to ignore the last thing he said, “That’s a lot of ‘B’s’.”

“And I meant every single one of them,” he told her, his eyes fixed on her and his tone serious.

She blushed and dropped her eyes, “Yeah, well, it’s nice of you to say so but that was just the dress; that wasn’t me.”

“No, it wasn’t,” he said quietly, his fingers still on her chin, his thumb tracing the dimple on her cheek.

“Trust me, it was,” she scoffed, trying to move away to defuse the intimacy of moment but he held her fast, his eyes searching hers, and the air grew thin between them.

“It wasn’t just the dress,” he said before leaning down and brushing his lips against hers.
Chapter Fifteen

sex

love
She gasped as his tongue swept across her lips and suddenly she was once again drawn into the sensation of kissing Oliver Queen.

His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb caressing her jawline, as his other hand wrapped around her waist to pull her closer. Her hands splayed against his chest before slowly, tentatively, wrapping around his shoulders until they were melting into one another. He moved her back until she was lying on the soft cloud of the duvet, his hand moving to her throat to caress a line to the V of her robe. His fingers slipped beneath the warm chenille until he was cupping the soft underside of her breast.

She moaned, not sure of where this was going but pretty much beyond caring. His mouth left hers and kissed across her cheek until his teeth and tongue found her unadorned earlobe and she inhaled sharply, desire pooling in her belly.

It was the ears. They always got her with the ears.

His free hand tangled in the silky strands of her hair as the other tugged her robe apart before cupping her waist and pulling her further up the bed. He stopped as he looked at the still livid bruises on her shoulder and collar bone. She’d taken some of the ‘Hell Island Magic Herbs’ but they were still rather dark even though the swelling was rapidly going down. Gently, tenderly, he kissed her there then used his teeth against her throat. She began to whimper as he gently pinched and pulled her nipple then nipped and sucked at the area between her shoulder and neck. Unconsciously she began to rub her thighs together, the slow heat rising from the juncture between her legs to throughout her body.

He pulled away from her long enough to slip his sweater over his head and then he was kissing her again, this time harder, deeper. His fingers slid to the back of her head and he ran his hand from her breast to her thigh. He pulled her leg to him until she was so snug against his body that she could feel his erection push at her through his trousers. She gasped as her uterus seemed to contract in response. She was on fire and her thighs were becoming almost embarrassingly slick with want.

His mouth left her lips to latch onto her breast. He ran his tongue against the delicate pale pink skin before scraping it with his teeth causing her to cry out and buck into his hips. He ground himself against her as he began a gentle suction interspaced with more tiny nips and the flicker of his tongue. His hand moved from her hip to her inner thighs, through the copious moisture gathering there, pausing long enough to make a gruff noise of approval against her breast, until he found the underside of her clit. Applying firm, steady pressure, he began to rub tiny circles into the nerve cluster, occasionally dipping into her heat for more lubrication. Her eyes rolled back as her entire attention zeroed in on what was happening between her thighs. It felt good, so good, but she needed more.

As though he were reading her mind, his fingers found her center and pushed inside as his thumb continued its slow torture of her clit. She moaned; a low wanton sound that she hardly recognized. He lifted his mouth from her breast to gaze intently at her expression of open want.

His hands left her and she protested with a whimper. He made a soothing noise, toeing off his shoes and pulling down his trousers and underwear before climbing back on the bed with her. He kissed her again; a long, slow, sensuous kiss that seemed to last forever. He kissed her like they had all the time in the world, like this night, this moment would last for all eternity and he refused to be rushed in his lovemaking. He kissed her until her head swam and she began to tremble. Had she been standing her knees would have failed her until she was a drained and insensible mass of flesh at his feet. He was addictive, intoxicating, and just when she thought she couldn’t take anymore he ended the kiss and moved his lips downward. He licked and sucked his way down her throat, between her
breasts, down her stomach, then pulled her thighs apart and kissed her center. She started and tried to sit up but he pushed her down with a gentle but firm hand pressed to her abdomen as his tongue flicked out to find the swollen evidence of her arousal nestled above her folds.

She gasped and clutched at the sheets as his tongue swept across her moist flesh, teasing her clit, before he suckled it gently. His hand left her stomach and he gripped her thighs, pulling them further apart as he took his time exploring her. It was erotic torture; this lazy sensual creature between her thighs seemed determined to drive her insane as he performed some arcane tantra of tongue, teeth, and lips. She couldn’t breathe, the oxygen left her lungs as he teased her with unhurried swipes of his tongue. His fingers moved up her inner thighs and he gently inserted them inside of her; first one, then two. She gasped at the slight but pleasurable sting of being stretched and he looked up, a wicked smile shining toward her in the form of full, glistening lips. “Ms. Smoak,” he said huskily, trying to get her attention.

“What?” She said dumbly, the passion-fuelled fog rendering her brain useless.

“You’ve been lying to me.”

“What?” She said, suddenly snapping to attention.

He glanced down at the translucent curls at the apex of her thighs, “Natural blonde,” he enunciated carefully in a slow drawl, the syllables rolling off his talented tongue in an exaggerated feast of long vowels and sharp consonants.

“Oh, uh—OH!” She was rendered suddenly speechless as he dove between her thighs with renewed vigor, his lips, tongue, teeth, and fingers acting in concert to bring her to a babbling boneless mess within seconds.

She thrashed and shuddered, speaking in the unintelligible language of passion as he sucked and nibbled at her heated flesh until her muscles tightened and she began to tremble through her orgasm. He kissed her thighs, the scrape of his beard adding to her pleasure as his cheeks rubbed against the pale sensitive skin. He drew the moment out for as long as he could, the fingers of one hand soothing her goose pimpled flesh as the long, thick digits of the other danced and teased against her center. He watched her unravel with hooded eyes and no small measure of smug satisfaction then scooted up the bed to lie beside her. He kissed her again with slow assurance and she could taste herself on his lips and tongue, the combination of his languid seduction and her own pheromones pushing all remaining lucidity from her mind. His hands drew her toward him, pulling her against then over until she was straddling him. She pulled away from his lips and looked between them in mild confusion but he tugged her upward until she was above him, her breasts level with his mouth as he began to nip and suck at them once more. His hand reached down between them and he lined himself up to her entrance before gently easing her down.

Through the sharp pang of penetration and her own fogged senses she watched as his eyes shut, his features melting into an expression of ecstasy as velvet encased steel sheathed itself inside warm, wet heat. They both moaned as one as she slid down slowly until he was buried to the hilt. His hands slipped up her body, under her robe, and then over her shoulders so that the material slipped down her arms to pool around them. He gazed intently at her form, now completely unobscured by the thick robe, and ran both his hands over her outer thighs until he had a firm grip on her hips. He lifted her slightly and encouraged her to move her hips so she was grinding against him in small circles, teaching her through his firm but gentle touch how to set the rhythm of their lovemaking.

Her head fell back as she gasped and moaned with every thrust of his hips, continuing to grind down. His back arched off the bed as he thrust inside her, his hardness hitting a spot deep within her that caused her belly to tighten and spots appear behind her eyelids. As his rhythm deepened she
began to breathe and pant heavily. His fingers found her clit and began to rub against her as she continued to swivel her hips against him and she faltered at the sharp, intensely pleasurable sensation that shot through her body.

He made an animalistic growl and then, in a skillful maneuver, he flipped them until he was once again in the dominant position. He grasped her thighs, hitching them over his waist, and roughly began to pound inside of her, slow seduction giving way to raw passion, as they raced toward completion. Every thrust of his hips sent a sweet, almost painful spark of energy through her entire body and all she could think of was the pleasure and sensation of being stretched, filled, and utterly possessed. Oliver’s mouth found her earlobe; his tongue curled as his teeth bit down and she cried out in pleasure, frantically clinging to him and mildly aware that she was now babbling nonsense. Words of want, need, and lust spilled forth in an almost unintelligible gibberish.

“Please,” she moaned. “Please, oh God, Oliver, I want—I want…!”

He looked down at her, his gaze dark and penetrating and it was all she could do not to open her mouth and confess every thought, every fantasy, every secret she’d ever had. Before she could speak words she would surely regret after their bodies had cooled, he found her mouth again, his tongue dueling with hers as he thrust his hips harder, faster, until she couldn’t stand up against the intensity of the onslaught of sensations any longer. Felicity’s mouth left his as she cried out, her back arched off the bed tight as a bowstring. She began to shiver and pulse, a rush of moist heat surrounding him, and heard the sharp intake of breath as he came, his body also shuddering in its release.

He leaned heavily against her, his weight offset by propping his elbows on either side of her. He buried his head in her neck, his breath coming in uneven pants as her heart raced so fast it felt as though her entire chest was vibrating. Her legs eased down off his hips and she curled her hands gently against his back, feeling the slick sweat on his skin.

I just had sex with Oliver, she thought as their bodies began to cool.

Holy crap.

He rolled over onto his back pulling her along with him, his hands gently rubbing her arm that was splayed over his chest, her head pillowed in the hollow of his shoulder. She stared at the watermark on her ceiling, her nose catching a faint whiff of the acrid scents of semen, sweat, and musk.

I, Felicity Smoak, just had sex with Oliver Queen.

She glanced at him, his eyes closed as his breathing began to calm. She looked down his torso at the many scars and tattoos that had become familiar over the last few years then lower to his softening but still engorged sex as it lay wet and glistening against his thigh.

I just had sex with Oliver in my bedroom. In my bed.

She shut her eyes and took a breath.

She glanced over at him again.

Yep, still there.

She eased out of bed conscious of the wetness between her thighs as she made her escape when he spoke.

“Where are you going?” He asked sleepily.
“Bathroom,” she said quickly. He hummed in response and she hurried over to her en suite, grabbing a wash cloth from the antique cabinet where she kept her towels and started to fill the tub. She eased into the warm water, wincing at the sting against her sex as she applied soap to the cloth and began to gently wash away the evidence of their lovemaking.

‘Well what do you expect, Felicity? You’ve had sex twice in two days after a four year long dry spell,’ came the voice in her head.

Suddenly all the air left her lungs and it felt as though she had been slammed face first into a wall of fire.

She had sex…

…with Bruce…

…and Oliver.

Panic, anxiety, and mortification all fought for dominance within her brain as a voice sounded from the doorway.

“Hey,” Oliver said as he leaned against the doorjamb.

“Hi,” she said feebly from the tub, holding the wash cloth against her chest in surprise before realizing how ridiculous that was.

“Nice tub but I’m more of a shower guy,” he hitched his head toward her walk-in glass enclosed shower. “Do you mind?”

“No, no of course not,” she said in a rush and pointed feebly at the chifforobe she used to store her linens. “There are towels and washcloths in there along with extra, um, robes.” Her eyes locked on his naked figure, so unashamedly displayed before her as though being naked together in the same room was a common occurrence. “They’re pretty big, one size fits all, so…” Then she heard the words coming out of her mouth and shut her eyes as she wondered if he’d show mercy and just let her drown in the tub.

“Thanks,” he said with a sexy half grin as he walked over to the old fashioned and purposefully shabby looking cabinet to pull out a large fluffy towel and a washcloth, “but I don’t think pink kitties and polka dots are a good look for me.”

“You can stay naked if you want to then, I don’t mind,” Felicity blurted out and then immediately covered her face with her hands, her humiliation reaching epic proportions but he just chuckled in response as he hung the bath sheet on a hook then entered the shower.

As soon as he was safely walled up within her shower she scrambled out of the bath and headed for her dresser pulling out the first thing she came across; a sleeveless long chemise in soft white cotton jersey that floated just above her ankles. It was one of her ‘summer’ nightgowns because the old house tended to be drafty and, while long, it was of a very thin, light material. This time of year she stuck mostly to fuzzy fleece lounge pants and camisoles or tees but she had a need to be not naked ASAP until she got her head on straight.

She looked around her bedroom feeling a bit shell-shocked. On her floor were Oliver’s clothes and she stooped to pick them up so they wouldn’t wrinkle, pausing briefly at his underwear before snagging them up and tossing them on top of the oversized chest of drawers where she kept her casual wear and lingerie. She then looked over at the bed and at the now rumpled duvet on top.
That comforter has seen a whole lot of action this week, came the stray thought. Her mind swirled; I slept with Oliver and Bruce. I slept with two different men in a week. No, I slept with two different men two days apart. They had talk shows about this sort of thing—and not the Oprah kind, trash talk shows like Maury and Jerry Springer; the kind where people booed and threw chairs at each other.

Holy Sally Jesse Raphael, what the hell was I thinking?

Fuck, fuck, fuck, what the fuck do I do now? I should call Tam, she thought. Tam would know what to do. She glanced at her smartphone on her nightstand. Shit, Gotham is three hours ahead so it’s too late at night to call her. She glanced at it again. Or maybe not. She started to go for her cell then stopped herself; if she called her sister then Oliver might walk in and overhear.

She stared off into space, frozen in place. Oh God, he’ll want to talk. How do I talk to him? What do we say? What do I say? Oh God, oh God, oh God…

I have to get out of here. She glanced at the window. I could escape through the neighbor’s yard, maybe catch a cab; the nightgown might be a problem…

“Hey,” Oliver said coming toward her with a frown, one of her extra-long bath sheets wrapped low on his hips, “You okay?” He asked, placing a hand on the center of her back.

“Uhhh, yeah. Why?” She said, turning toward him with a doe in headlights look on her face.

He smiled and gathered her up in his arms. “Shh, it’s okay,” he said softly, as he rubbed her back gently and tucked her head under his chin. “It’s okay to be a little freaked out. I’m a little freaked out myself.”

“Yeah?” She asked as she melted into his skin, still moist and warm from the shower.

“Of course,” he rumbled quietly against her, placing a kiss against her hair. “We’ve been friends for a long time and I never wanted to mess that up with sex. Besides, this is the first time you’ve had sex in four years and I’m only the second guy you’ve ever been with. I don’t blame you for being a little nervous.” She stiffened in his arms, her eyes going wide as he looked down at her and chuckled, “It’s okay, I’ve got you, alright?”

“Okay,” she said faintly as he led her back to the bed and pulled back the covers. Oh God, oh God, oh God…

He walked to the other side and tugged off the towel, letting it fall to the floor as he eased between the sheets and pulled her into his arms. With gentle pressure he urged her to lay her head on his chest as he rubbed her back soothingly. “By the way, I meant to tell you, other than all the broken glass and smashed up toasters this is a really nice place.”

“Thanks,” she breathed out, her voice trembling slightly as she tried to figure out just what the rules were when it came to this sort of thing. How do you tell the guy you just slept with that he’s not the first one you got naked with this week? She glanced at her phone again. What was the etiquette for a thing like that? Her vision dimmed for a moment and she felt almost faint with terror. I wonder if this is something they would cover in Miss Manners? And if she didn’t tell him was that the same as lying? And if she did tell him would he hate her and think she was some kind of slut? Her brain paused; can you be a slut if you’ve only had sex twice in four years? Was it based on how many times you had sex altogether or how many people you did it with because she was only up to two people and—

She did the calculations in her head; Bruce was Batcave, shower, bed, shower, kitchen, bed, shower,
wall, floor, shower back in Gotham then bed again the other night so that was 11 and Oliver in her bed made 12. Two people, twelve times, twice in four years, two days apart…

Fuck, this is too much math right now! It’s like some really twisted dirty dream where you’re naked and you forgot to study but with lots and lots of sex—I’ve got to call Tam.

“Laurel wanted to get a place in this part of the city. She liked the old houses and all the history in the area but I wanted something more modern then—” he sighed. “Well, the island happened and she wound up getting a place with Tommy closer to her job.” He looked down at her, his arm squeezing her in a half hug as he laid another kiss on her head. “I’m sorry, I probably shouldn’t be talking about my ex right after—“

“No!” Felicity said quickly. “No, it’s fine. Really. I mean, you shared a lot of history together and it’s natural that there would still be feelings there. You know, like, guilt or other…feelings; even if you shouldn’t feel guilty because you have absolutely no reason to. Really. I mean, she was the first person you ever really loved so it’s natural you would think about her right now, at this moment,” she swallowed. “Trust me, I’m not going to judge you for that. At all.”

He laid another kiss on the top of her head and hummed contentedly, “I know you wouldn’t but I still shouldn’t be talking about her right now. I mean, our relationship over the last several years has been pretty back and forth but I think really am over her. Romantically, anyway. I have been for a while but I’ll never be able to completely let go of the guilt, you know?”

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“Yeah,” Felicity breathed. “I can understand guilt perfectly.” Tam, Tam, Tam, Tam…

“I just wanted you to know that even though Laurel has a tendency to throw me off my game, and believe me I know it can get irritating; it’s not love, not anymore. I care about her but we’re just not right together and I think we both finally realize that,” he told her softly. “Whatever this is between us I want you to know that the only person in my arms right now is you.” He tilted her chin up and kissed her mouth gently, “Okay?”

“Okay, but even if you weren’t I’d be fine with it,” Felicity told him, her heart thudding against her ribcage as she tried to control her oncoming panic attack. “I mean, these things just…happen sometimes, right?” She looked up at him pleadingly, “Seriously, even if you told me you slept with her, say, two or three days ago, I’d be fine with it. I mean, we weren’t, um, you know, and, uh, well, it would be none of my business. In fact, don’t tell me. Seriously, because you shouldn’t kiss and tell, right? Telling isn’t cool. Telling is bad. I mean it would be between the two of you just like what happens between us is our business. No matter what,” she let out a slightly strangled sound as she fought to find the right words, “either of us may have done before tonight, our, um, thing is new and completely, um, new. The point is that the past is in the past,” she said with just a hint of panic. “Completely in the past. Totally. Totally in the past…” she let her voice trail off as she swallowed hard.

“Felicity?”

“Yeah?” She breathed, looking up at him and praying that she would just shut up already.

“Just because we weren’t expecting this it doesn’t mean I think you’re easy,” he said with a gentle smile. “I know you aren’t. I know you don’t sleep around and, even if you did, it wouldn’t matter to me. Stop worrying about it and just relax, okay? We’re good.”

“Are you sure?” She asked in a wobbly voice.

He chuckled and tilted her head up to give her a sweet and lingering kiss, “You really are adorable,
you know that? And not in a little sister way because, trust me, I’m not feeling the least bit familial right now. ‘Adorable’ is definitely a sexy look on you,” His lips found hers as he eased her head down to the pillow and deepened the kiss, his hand trailing down her flat stomach as he reached for the hem of her gown. “Adorable, smart, beautiful, passionate,” he said huskily against her lips and eased her gown up to her thighs as he drew circles on the inside of her knee with his thumb. His mouth moved to her cheek, kissing her gently, before he drew back to look at her with a tender expression, “and the most extraordinary lover I’ve ever had.”

“Really?” She asked in a small voice as her brain began to melt again.

“Yes,” he said before claiming her mouth in a deep kiss and moving his hand upwards until he was again brushing against her center.

Her brain snapped back into gear and she caught his hand, pulling away from his kiss, “Uh, Oliver, I…um…” She flushed, “See, the truth is that I, uh—it’s not that—I mean, I didn’t—oh God, this is embarrassing,” she breathed out in a nervous rush. “Oliver, I have to tell you something and--“

He kissed her into silence. “Hush, it’s okay, I understand. You don’t have to be embarrassed,” he said softly, his smile tender and more than a little filled with male pride. His fingers brushed a stray curl from her forehead, gently tucking it behind her ear before frowning in concern, “It’s just some soreness, right? Things got a little vigorous and I might have been a bit too rough--”

“No,” she said quickly, “I’m okay; you were fine—I mean it was great; perfect! Wonderful, in fact. It’s just…it’s just…I—I, um…”

“You?” He prompted. “It’s okay, you can tell me anything; I promise. Just talk to me, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart.

That…was not something she expected to hear; not from Oliver. It was, well, not bad per se, just highly unexpected. Of course, nothing that had happened in the last several days could be classified as ‘normal’, but sweetheart?

‘Baby’ she could handle obviously, ‘darling’, ‘love’, and its variables of ‘lover’ and ‘my love’ always made her feel a little squidgy ever since the weirdness with Slade, but ‘sweetheart’?

And it wasn’t the slightly patronizing kind of ‘sweetheart’ Lance sometimes used; it was ‘sweet’ pause ‘heart’.

Sweet Heart.

As in; ‘I think you have a sweet (pause) heart,’ which was only a hop, skip, and a jump away from saying some other really deep shit that she just could not handle at that moment.

Damn; he skipped ahead three or four heartfelt endearments and broke out the big guns.

She took a centering breath, “It’s just been a lot for one week, you know?” She said in a slightly pitchy way.

He chuckled then gave her another tender kiss on the lips, “Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.” He looked at her bruised shoulder that was already beginning to yellow on the edges thanks to the herbs and ran his hand over the healing blemish on her arm. “I…when he grabbed you, I--”

“It’s nothing,” she said quietly, closing her eyes at the memory.
“No, it’s not nothing,” he said firmly, his eyes darkening in response to his own recollections of that night. “When you told him that you were the Arrow, I thought he was going to kill you and there was nothing I could do to stop him because I was trapped in that damn basement and I couldn’t get to you fast enough.” He closed his eyes, his face going still. “I kept thinking of… I kept thinking about that night; about seeing you and Slade and not being able to stop it from happening again.”

“No, Oliver,” she told him quietly, stroking a gentle hand over his hair. “It wasn’t the same. Batman isn’t anything like Slade.”

His eyes opened and she could see the lingering embers of fear within them, “It felt the same; like you were going to die and I was helpless to do anything but watch.”

“I was safe, I promise,” she told him carefully. “He doesn’t do that, he doesn’t kill people, and he’d never deliberately hurt me. It was just an accident. I know it looked bad from where you and Dig were sitting but I was never in any real danger from him and I knew that.”

“Why did you do it?” He asked, searching her eyes with his. “If he wanted to find me so badly why didn’t you let him? And why set yourself up like that? I could have handled it and you wouldn’t have had to get hurt.”

“I couldn’t risk that,” she told him, her heart, though still confused, shown in her eyes for a moment. “I was safe, but you… I was trying to protect you.”

“That’s not your job, that’s my job,” he said in a soft yet firm tone. “I’m the Arrow, it’s my responsibility. You should have never put yourself in that position. If something had happened to you…” His hand cupped her cheek as his thumb brushed her lips. “I couldn’t take it, Felicity; I couldn’t survive it. I’ve lost—” he paused as he took a shaky breath, “I’ve lost too much, I can’t lose you, too.”

“I’m fine,” she told him again. “It just looks nasty. I’ve had worse bruises coming off a case or sparring with Sara.”

“Felicity,” he said warningly, his eyes hard as he looked down at her.

She grimaced, “Okay, maybe it’s a little worse, but I know him and it really wasn’t intentional.”

He rubbed his fingers over the bruises gently, the muscles in his jaw tensing as he stared down at them before returning his eyes to hers. “Even if Batman doesn’t kill on purpose, even if you thought you were safe, accidents happen and sometimes we don’t get to walk away with just a scrape and a few bruises. Don’t ever do that to me again, okay? And you’re getting rid of those false trails you laid out. You will not sacrifice yourself, Felicity; understand? Never again, do you hear me? Not for me and not for Diggle. Get rid of them; all of them.”

“I—” she began.

“No,” he told her. “Diggle and I found the files. We know what you were planning; we saw all of the contingencies. If any of them lead to you being implicated in any of this I want them gone.”

“It was my choice,” Felicity said quietly. “When I decided to stay with you I knew what I was getting into, and if it comes down to a choice between my freedom and you and Dig continuing the mission, I—”

Oliver placed a finger against her lips then dipped his head and kissed the red and black bruise on her collarbone, “Never again, Felicity.” He lifted his head and looked her in the eye, “There is no choice to make; you will always come first. Before me, before Diggle, before the mission; before anyone
you come first. Take them down and if he comes near you again you call me or Dig; preferably me, understood? You might have history with him but this is my city and I'm the one he needs to deal with, not you. He's not allowed to so much as touch you ever again."

"Okay," she said quietly, entranced by the shifting colors in his eyes.

"Promise me," he said softly, his fingers tracing the shape of her cheek bone as he held her spellbound.

"I promise," she whispered and he kissed her lips lovingly, his tongue tasting her mouth before moving to her cheek then to her ear.

He brushed her earlobe with his nose before nipping it gently and chuckling as she gasped, her flesh breaking out in goosebumps. "So sensitive..." he rumbled, "I love the way you make love, Felicity Smoak." He kissed her mouth gently once again then nuzzled her neck, "You have no idea what you do to me, do you? How many times I've wanted to just touch you and now it's like I can't stop. You're... intoxicating," he breathed against the shell of her ear causing her to shiver and whimper in pleasure. "I feel like I could make love to you forever and I don't think I'd ever get tired of it. Just the way you respond to being touched..." He watched her skin flush and her lips part as he gently stroked the back of her neck with his fingertips. "God, you're so beautiful when you do that. I can't believe you ever thought you weren't the kind of woman who inspired passion. Wayne is an idiot," he whispered against her lips.

Her eyes closed, "I... Oliver, I..."

"Shh," he told her. "We still have a lot to sort out, okay?" His lips brushed hers teasingly, less of a kiss and more of a caress of flesh against flesh that made her tingle from her head to her toes. He pulled away from her reluctantly, "We should talk but it's late; do you want to just sleep for now and we'll revisit this in the morning?"

Oh God, did he say morning? Felicity froze, her mind going from warm and fuzzy to ice cold panic instantly. He's spending the night? Here? What if Bruce shows up because that could happen? Bruce could even show up tonight, he hadn't left town otherwise Barbara would have told her. What if Bruce shows up as Batman and Oliver sees him? Shit! Shit, shit, shit; where the fuck is my phone?

"Actually, I'm not very tired right now—I mean, I am, I'm exhausted really. You really, uh, tuckered me out but my mind is a little, um, full of, uh, stuff, but if you are you can..." she started to get out of bed and grab her cellphone to call her sister or Barbara or anyone for that matter but he stopped her.

"Good, because I wanted to talk about what Isabel said to you again. If that's okay?" He added.

"Oh, Yeah." She eased back into his arms and nodded. "Sure, yeah."

He met her eyes before kissing her forehead and lingering there for a moment, his large hands cradling her face, "Hey, no need to be scared. It's still us, right?" She took a deep shuddering breath and nodded. He pulled back and brushed a wayward lock of hair behind her ear, "Good, and I want you to know that I'm ready to really listen to what you have to say this time, I promise. Now what exactly happened at this lunch you had with Isabel?"

Okay, she thought as she centered herself, this I can handle. She shut her eyes for a moment, willing all the stray emotions that were driving her into a frenzy back into their box, and focused. Three, two, one...

"This morning Isabel called me and asked me to meet her for lunch at Leviathan," she started slowly. "I wasn't going to go, the last thing I wanted to do was have lunch with that woman, but she was..."
pretty insistent and it made me curious so I went.”

“It started out fairly normal. We both had the fish, she ordered some pretty decent wine, and we had polite chitchat. Finally she asked me why I quit,” his face darkened and his lips tightened a bit but she continued. “I told her that I was just ready to move on and that seeing my dad reminded me that being your EA wasn’t what I set out to do. She told me she had done her research, apologized again for being so insulting to me, and offered me a job at Stellmoor.”

“What about the other stuff, the things she said about me being the Arrow?”

“That came a little later,” she told him. “First she started selling me on the idea of joining Stellmoor. She said, um…”

He looked at her intently, “She said what?”

God, this part was embarrassing. “She said, um, that she knew I had dressed and acted the way I had at the meeting because of Bruce.” She felt herself blush from head to toe.

“I see,” he said, pulling back slightly.

“No, wait; not like that,” she said quickly, placing her hand on his arm. “She meant that she saw what I was trying to do. I knew Bruce might show up and I didn’t want him to think I was still intimidated by him or that I was still ‘Baby’, the 19 year old girl who let him get in her pants because she’d had a crush on him since she was four and he only slept with because he was bored.” She almost felt like crying right then. “I wasn’t trying to get back with him or anything, or be a tease. Not really. I mean, I…I just didn’t want him to walk in that room and see me, the glasses and pencil skirt wearing nerd. I wanted to be someone strong and sexy who didn’t need him to swoop in and rescue her. I didn’t mean to use you or to----“ She stopped, rolling away from him to wrap her arms around her knees and tucked her head down so he wouldn’t see the stinging tears of embarrassment and guilt. “I’m sorry. It was my fault. I’m so sorry. This, all of it, I did this…I--”

She felt his hand on her back and he leaned in and told her, “It’s okay, I understand. He hurt you so you wanted to show him that you didn’t need him. I get that. I’ve been there, remember?” He said quietly. “If you think that running away from being ‘Baby’ is tough, try having everyone you love tell you that they want ‘Ollie’ back even though ‘Ollie’ was the world’s biggest asshat.”

“Newsflash; sometimes you’ve still got your head up your ass,” Felicity said, her nose running like a faucet as slow, traitorous tears flowed over her cheeks. She buried her face further in her arms.

“Yeah, and I’m really sorry about that,” Oliver told her. “Treating you the way I did, that was something ‘Ollie’ would have done. I shouldn’t have blown you off like that.”

She sniffled, wishing she had a tissue and looked up. “It’s okay, I’ve been acting more like a ‘Baby’ than a ‘Felicity’ myself. Case in point,” she said with a weak laugh as she gestured to her wet cheeks and runny nose.

He gave her a funny smile and reached across her to her nightstand for the box of Kleenex before dabbing at her cheeks then handing it to her so she could wipe her nose. “I’ll admit it; I was…shit, I was jealous and when I saw Wayne looking at you like that, it sort of brought out the worst in me. I could tell that there was something between you and that you were angry at him for something. Plus the dress,” he grinned, “It really was a great dress. You looked good in it. Actually, you looked better out of it.” He winked at her and she felt herself smile back in return. “You know,” he said as he reached for her hand and rubbed her knuckles gently with his thumb, “I said this before but it bears repeating now: I’ve wanted you for a long time; the real Felicity, not the one in the skin tight
He took a deep breath, “I don’t do relationships. I’m not that guy but you are that girl, the kind of woman a guy like me learns to keep their distance from because you aren’t…” He brushed his fingers across her cheek and she watched the shift of emotions across his face, “You aren’t the kind of girl you play games with, Felicity; you’re a forever kind of girl, the kind a man takes very seriously and I’ve never been good at that so I held back. I kept my distance and did what I thought was the right thing. I’ll admit that I probably never would have acted on my attraction towards you but when Wayne showed up I knew he would. I could see it in his eyes. That day, at the conference, he had this look in his eyes and I just knew. He looked at you like you weren’t just that girl, you were his girl, but…all I could think about was the fact that you once told me that you were my girl; you’re mine. It might have been pure selfishness on my part but I knew that he wouldn’t hesitate, he wouldn’t run, and even if you’d be better off with him I just needed to…I needed to kiss you at least once because,” he glanced away from her for a second then met her eyes again, his expression one of raw emotion, “because I’ve wanted to kiss you since the day I met you and I had to know how you tasted before you walked out of that door forever.”

Her heart skipped a beat and she fell. Throwing all good sense out of the window she leaned toward him and placed her lips against his. He made a deep rumbling sound of satisfaction, and pulled her toward him until they were lying on their sides, one of his hands tangled in her hair, and the other cupping her butt and squeezing possessively. She whimpered and pushed her hips against him, her leg thrown over his as he pressed into the cradle of her thighs through the thin, soft cotton of her gown. He was naked under the sheets and she could feel his interest stir as her hands traveled down the hard muscles of his back. Then, after another few seconds of kissing her until her toes curled, his lips firmed upon retreat and he leaned back slightly, his eyes dark and wild. He took a steadying breath and reluctantly moved his hand from her behind to her waist. “We’re never going to get through this if you keep tempting me, woman,” he said in a low tone that made her insides melt. He was right. They had to talk about this; they had to sort it all out. Just a few minutes ago she was in a panic about the fact that they had sex and…and…

Screw it.

“We can talk later,” she said, her lips trailing over his jaw line. Her mouth made it to his neck and she licked the corded muscles there, her teeth scraping against his flesh as she felt his hands tightening on her waist. He made an impatient noise and his mouth captured hers as he moved on top of her and grabbed her nightgown, pulling it up and off.

Her head fell back as he began to suck at her neck scraping the soft skin with his teeth before shrugging off the covers and sitting up on his knees. He pulled her legs over his hips rubbing his hard flesh up and down her center to gather the fluid needed for an easy penetration. Reaching between her legs he rubbed her clit as his erection teased her entrance.

“Don’t stop,” she whimpered, trying to pull him in.

“I’m not going to stop; I’m never going to stop,” he told her as he eased forward, his eyes filled with dark promise. Her head fell back as she arched off the bed to meet him. “Oh fuck, you feel so goddamn good,” he breathed as he watched their bodies join as one. “God, that’s beautiful.”

“Please,” Felicity begged as he moved inside of her with excruciating slowness.
“Tell me what you want,” he told her as his hips pulled back, his hands locked around her hips preventing her from moving as he continued his sensual torture. “Do you want me to touch you? Do you want my fingers back?”

“Oliver!” She begged, tightening her legs over his hips to try to force him inside of her.

“Say it; tell me.”

“Yes,” she said then cried out as his thumb found her clit.

“Now what do you want?” He asked her, thrusting slowly in and out. “Talk to me, sweetheart; what do you want, hmm?”

“You,” she moaned, reaching out to grab at his arms.

“And how do you want me?” He asked her. “Like this?” He thrust inside of her slowly. “Or like this?” He pulled her hard against him causing her to cry out sharply as he suddenly hit bottom.

He made love to her, his rhythm switching from slow and steady, to hard and deep. “Tell me what you want,” he whispered in her ear as he entered her over and over. “Tell me.”

“You! I just want you! Please!” She told him, her nails digging into his hips, the sweet friction of their bodies driving her past the point of control. He thrust inside of her harder and harder in an almost punishing rhythm. She heard the sounds of their bodies slapping together, the wet pull of flesh against flesh, and she began to whimper and tighten her body around him until she heard his breath catch. She pulled his neck down until his mouth was on hers causing him to sink even deeper. They both cried out in pleasure.

“How long?” He asked, his breath coming in pants. “Tell me how long; how long have you wanted this?”

“Always,” she gasped. “Always! Please!”

“I wish I had known that,” he said, jerking his hips into her roughly and causing her to cry out before changing his rhythm again into something slow and maddening. “I wish I had found you sooner, loved you sooner. You have no idea, do you?” He thrust inside her again and hissed in pleasure at her reaction, “Christ, you’re so…I’ve never had anyone respond to me like you do. I just want to lose myself in you and never stop,” he thrust inside her again and they both moaned and she began to whimper. “You’re so beautiful…the sounds you make.” He thrust again and then bent down to suck one of her nipples in his mouth and watched as she arched into him, chuckling darkly. “You have no idea how much I’ve been torturing myself.” He ground his hips into hers, filling her to her absolute limits and she shivered and clawed at him. “For days now I kept replaying what happened in my mind; the way you tasted, the way you looked and felt, how wet you were... I wanted you so much, wanted to feel you from the inside so badly it nearly drove me insane. Today, you were yelling at me and I just wanted to grab you and kiss you senseless, make love to you until we were both exhausted. I held back, I stopped myself from touching you but just barely. God, I wish I had just touched you. I wish we had done this years ago.” He thrust inside her in hard, rapid succession; one, two, three and she cried out again, her body stiffening, her toes curling, as her orgasm began to build.

“Tell me you belong with me, Felicity,” He whispered. “Tell me you’re mine. Tell me that this is what you want.”

“T-T-Tell me you are mine,” she gasped when he thrust harder, “Oliver, please!”

He made a low, dangerous sound deep in his throat and leveraged himself onto his knees, never
stopping the slow grinding motion of his hips, until he was again looking between them. His thumb moved again to her center, giving her the friction she craved as he gave up on slow torture and pounded inside of her mercilessly. “Come for me,” he told her. “I want to see you come. I want to feel it.” His voice was deep, dark, and so reminiscent of the Arrow that she lost it.

“Oliver!” Her vision went dark and her body tightened as she clutched at him desperately. She screamed his name over and over again in a babbling tangent of need, want, and desire until all of it, every emotion, every fantasy, came down to just his name. He thrust deep inside her body and she felt her orgasm flood out of her. Their combined flesh grew slick and hot as a burst of moisture erupted from her center and surrounded him.

“God!” He shouted then gritted his teeth as though in pain. His eyes slammed shut and his arms pulled her tight against him as he unleashed himself inside of her. “Fuck!”

She sobbed in relief as they both shuddered into one another, her hands running over his hair comfortingly as his own paroxysms gradually calmed. He eased her legs down, their bodies still joined as he lay against her. She became aware of the wet trails of tears on her cheeks as she opened her heart to the moment even though she knew she was falling far too hard, far too fast.

He breathed harshly against her neck, his grip on her easing but not letting go. After a few seconds he raised his head and looked down at her, his thumb reaching up to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

“Hi,” he said breathlessly as he smiled down at her.

“Hi,” she smiled back wearily, her eyes feeling heavy with sated exhaustion.

“That was good,” he snorted into her neck.

“Very good,” Felicity agreed wearily, her fingers trailing over him soothingly.

“Amazing even,” he whispered against her temple. “You’re amazing.” He kissed her closed eyes softly; first one then the other before his lips rested once more against her temple, his body still cradled between her thighs as he softened inside of her but he made no move to extricate himself.

“We have a problem though,” he whispered against her.

“Mmm?” She murmured, sleep beginning to pull at her.

“You’re too amazing. So amazing that now you’re stuck with me. I don’t think I can let you go; not now.” He took a deep shuddering breath, “I don’t want to let you go.”

She opened her eyes, her exhaustion suddenly forgotten. “Are you sure?” She asked, feeling her heart constrict in her chest and hating how vulnerable she sounded.

He swallowed, his eyes trailing over her face as he ran his finger over her cheek, “I don’t know what this is but I’m in. I’m not letting go. Never again.” He kissed her cheek and then her mouth and she could taste the salt of her tears on them, “You’re mine now, okay? You’re mine and we’re going to figure this out together.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Oliver,” she said against his mouth. “Please, just tell me now and I’ll be fine, I promise, just don’t—“

He captured her lips again and his tongue swept inside her mouth, overwhelming her until her mind completely shut down. He pulled away and nuzzled her cheek, his lips so close to her ear she could feel the moist warmth of his breath on her skin, “I want you and I can’t see that changing any time soon.” He pulled back until he could look at her again, “We’ve wasted enough time as it is. I’m not
doing that anymore; not with you. You belong to me and I…I like the way this feels.” He stroked his hand over her cheek. “You make me feel…good,” he said quietly, “and I haven’t felt good in a very long time. In fact, I don’t think it’s ever felt this good or this right before; not with anyone and not ever.”

She looked at him, her eyes feeling hot and she suddenly felt like weeping from the relief she felt at his words but part of her still held back. That little niggling voice of doubt that came from experience pulled at her. “I don’t expect anything from you, Oliver,” she said quietly. “Don’t tell me something like that because you think it’s what I want to hear. I don’t expect a happily ever after from you and I don’t need pretty words or false hope. It’s—this—is enough for me. Just…just don’t say anything you don’t mean, okay? Don’t do this if you’re just going to turn around and say it was a mistake later.”

“I’m not letting go,” he said firmly and kissed her again then pulled back so he could stroke her hair, brushing it off her forehead as his fingers traced the line of her eyebrow down to her cheek. “There will be problems, yes. I can’t even begin to think of the logistics of all of this but I only know that…” He laid his forehead against hers and shut his eyes, “This isn’t just sex. Any more than that I can’t promise but we’ll take it one day at a time,” he told her.

She couldn’t just accept that yet, though. Not quite yet, “I hear what you’re saying but a lot of things can change between now and tomorrow, or next week…I have to go to Gotham and—“

“You’re not going anywhere,” he told her.

“But I—“

“You’re staying with me,” he told her, the ring of finality in his tone as he lifted his head and his eyes caught hers. “Here; in Starling where you belong.”

“But he—“

“That son of a bitch does not get to come into my city and push me around,” he said with a hint of the Arrow’s darkness shining in his deep blue eyes. “You’re mine and I intend to keep you.”

“I’m not a bone you can bury in the backyard, you know?” She said without any heat.

“Maybe, but it doesn’t change how I feel,” he told her unapologetically. “If that makes me a territorial SOB then so be it, but Batman isn’t taking you away from me; not without a fight.”

“But how can you be sure that this is what you want?” She asked. “Maybe this is just, I don’t know; temporary insanity on your part due to heightened emotions and a post-coital endorphin rush?”

“Is that what this is for you?” He eased away, rolling onto his side and pulling her with him so they were resting their heads against the same pillow, his eyes boring into hers as though seeking out a deeper truth. He smoothed his hand down her back before letting it rest at her waist. “Temporary insanity?”

She opened her mouth to speak the words she almost said during the heat of passion but managed to somehow curb the impulse, saying instead, “Have you ever heard of a psychological tactic during police interrogation called ‘eliciting the need to confess’? It’s that urge most people have to just blurt out the truth; I have that in spades,” she told him and he smiled at her, his eyes dancing with loving amusement. “Yeah, well, it’s not exactly a well-kept secret,” she grimaced. “The thing is the need to confess cuts both ways. Sometimes people will admit to things just because they give in to that urge even when it might not be the truth. Right now all I need from you is the truth and if the truth is that this needs to end tomorrow then that’s what I want to hear. Don’t…don’t confess to feeling
something or wanting something that isn’t there just to please me because that’s the last thing I would ever want from you. If you really want me to stay then I will, I will stay with you, Oliver; but don’t ask me just because you want to protect me or to spite him and if I do stay I still won’t come back to QC. I can’t; that’s over.”

He cupped her cheek with his hand, “I don’t want you to stay so you can be my EA. I don’t want you to stay to spite him or because I feel some kind of obligation towards you. I just want you,” He smiled at her. “I. Want. You. Does that clear things up for you?”

Unable to speak, she merely nodded in silent affirmation.

“Good,” he whispered against her lips, kissing her again. “Now,” he said, taking a deep breath and pulling away so he could shift onto his back. He adjusted the pillow under his head and eased her down so her head was nestled in the hollow of his shoulder then ran his fingers up and down her spine. “So Isabel brought up the meeting…?” He prompted, his voice a bit more husky than it had been.

“Seriously?” She chuckled. “How can you even remember what we were talking about after that?”

“Are you implying that I might have screwed your brains out just now?” He asked her, a hint of mischief coloring his tone.

“I’m not implying it; I’m stating it outright,” she told him enjoying the rumbling sound of his laughter against her ear as she laid her head on his chest. “Okay,” She took a shuddering breath and willed her brain cells to click back on. “So Isabel brought up the meeting but not in a ‘you’re the office whore’ kind of way. She was…how do I put this?” Felicity squinted slightly as if the words were right in front of her face, “It was like she was admiring the way I handled myself in there. She kept using words like ‘psychological attack’ and ‘strategy’ and dissected every nuance of what was said or how both of you reacted. She made it seem like I was some kind of femme fatale from a Bond movie or something and told me that I was exactly the kind of woman Stellmoor was looking for.”

“Hmm,” if Oliver seemed unsettled by any of what she said it didn’t show. “When did she start talking about the Arrow?”

“Not too long after that but first she started talking about some other stuff that was just weird. She started talking about women, about how we’re superior to men, and then she, uh,” she looked up at him a little sheepishly.

“Made a pass?” He said with a wry grin.

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “And before you say that I might have misconstrued anything, I specifically asked her if she was hitting on me and she said she was. I told her I liked men and she said that she did as well but only occasionally for ‘scratching the itch’ but that women were what really floated her boat and hinted that if I were interested we could come to some sort of arrangement.”

He frowned and bent his arm behind his head as he held her against him. His fingers stroked up and down her skin as he seemed to consider his words before speaking again. “A lot of people saw us after the meeting; the catering and maintenance staff at least. It was pretty obvious you were upset with me and that something happened in that room,” he rubbed his hand down her arm again as if to take away the sting of the memory for them both. “If you were after me like she thought you were you wouldn’t have gotten angry or upset. A mercenary or fortune-hunter would have ridden someone like me all the way to the bank. It wouldn’t surprise me if that information filtered up to her. The fact that you quit with no notice right afterwards didn’t get past her either. Bruce was obviously interested in you as well but you shut him down every chance you got. I mean, not to brag, but
besides the whole billionaire thing I’m a pretty good looking guy and Wayne may be an ass but he’s a walking GQ ad and built like a friggin’ linebacker. Women notice guys like that and you had both of us running in circles and yet you didn’t seem to care. I wonder if she assumed you were gay?” He looked at her, “Look at it from her perspective; you have to admit Barry and Daniel are the only guys you’ve dated lately and all you and Barry shared was one dance at a work function while you and Daniel really only went out a couple of times at most.” He narrowed his eyes in concentration, “If I’m recalling it correctly, around the time Garret was in the picture, Isabel was overseas dealing with Stellmoor and our European subsidiaries so he would barely have registered as a blip on her radar and Barry wouldn’t even rate that much. Plus, we’re unusually close, almost too close to simply be coworkers, and we were very clear with everyone that we’re just friends. Best friends, in fact.”

“I’m your best friend?” She asked, suddenly feeling very touched.

“Shh, I’m thinking out loud,” he kissed the tip of her nose and smiled, “but yes. Now where was I? If I was Isabel it would be pretty obvious to me that you’re an attractive woman and we have chemistry, because you are and we do, and yet, from her limited perspective you seemed to have a strong negative reaction towards me when I finally made sexual advances. Maybe she added two plus two and got five and just didn’t realize it. Maybe making overtures was her way of testing her theory? If you weren’t gay she probably knew you’d tell her but if you were, well, we both know she isn’t above using sex to get what she wants.”

“So, back in Russia you knew she wasn’t…that she didn’t, um…?” Felicity stammered hesitantly.

He smiled in mild amusement and stroked his finger down the side of her face, “Not every woman is like you. There are a lot of women who think of sex as a commodity in my world. I knew she was trying to figure me out and she was willing to use sex to do it. It would have raised too many alarms if I turned her down. The Oliver Queen she thought she was in business with would never turn down sex with a beautiful woman if she offered it.”

She looked at him in surprise, “Wait, so you didn’t really want her then either? But how were you able to, um…” she allowed her voice to trail off suggestively. He chuckled and she smacked him. “It’s not funny!”

“I’m a man,” Oliver said wryly. “Emotions really didn’t have anything to do with it. It was just sex.”

“I don’t get that,” she said in disgust.

“Of course you don’t,” he said, giving her another look that made her insides melt. “You don’t do anything unless your whole heart is in it. That’s what makes you so dangerous.” He nuzzled her ear softly and whispered, “Finish telling me the story.”

She looked down at the sunflowers adorning the soft jersey cotton of her duvet cover and bit her lip, “Okay, well, like I was saying; she offered and I turned her down but only after babbling like an idiot for a few minutes,” he chuckled again and she shot him a dirty look without any heat behind it. “And then she started getting to the good part. I asked her why they wanted me of all people and she said it was because of my history with you, meaning the Arrow. I told her I didn’t know anything about that and she shrugged it off and started getting pretty specific about a few things. She said Stellmoor targeted QC because of the Arrow and that they recruited vigilantes of their own, female vigilantes. She said that they were basically trying to create their own army and support network of modern Amazon warriors to protect the Earth. When I started to blow her off she mentioned Sara and how she was the Black Canary.”

Oliver’s face grew stony, his gaze sharp and penetrating. “Did she say ‘Black Canary’ or did she call Sara by name?”
“Both,” Felicity answered. “She said Sara Lance was the Black Canary, that Stellmoor was the one bank rolling her, and that they eventually wanted to move her to Starling permanently as their own vigilante presence here in the city.” Felicity thought about that for a moment, “There’s no way Sara was the one who exposed you, right? It makes no sense.”

He paused as if to consider it, his face looking much more troubled than it had a few moments ago. “It’s possible but not likely. We have a…past; beyond the obvious.” He looked down at her, more Arrow than Oliver. “Sara and I both had to do things on that island we weren’t proud of. I’m not saying she wouldn’t betray me, she’s done it before, but that was then and we’ve both changed. We’re long past having to act out of survival and if she really wanted to expose me all she’d have to do is drop a dime and I’d be in cuffs by now.” He looked at her grimly, “What else did she say?”

“She said that she knew I had been acting as the tech for Team Arrow. She brought up the bombing in the Glades and asked me that if I hadn’t-,” she licked her lips nervously but pushed on, “If I hadn’t had to rely on you, Dig, and Lance; if I’d had a team of my own out there who listened to me when I gave orders and a real support system behind me if I could have saved more lives.”

She couldn’t read his expression anymore. He’d gone from the man who’d just made love with her to the hard faced and emotionless warrior under the hood. Finally he spoke, “She’s not entirely wrong. If I had listened to you when you wanted to go out in the field you might have been able to recruit Lance and find the second device in time to disarm it.” He looked at her, “That said if I knew then what I know now, it still wouldn’t have changed my decision. Had you gone out after the second device there is a very good chance that all those people and Tommy still would have died only you would have been killed as well. I’ll never regret that decision even if it did cost lives.”

“It’s in the past, Oliver. What’s done is done,” she said gently. He nodded brusquely and motioned for her to continue. “Anyway, she ended it by telling me there was no deadline to their offer and that as soon as I made a decision I should contact her.”

“Anything else?”

“Just that they’re everywhere. She said they have representatives in every major city and ties to the government and the military,” she looked to him again. “Oliver, I don’t think she was lying. I’ve only been investigating this a day and already I have enough to suspect that ARGUS is connected to them somehow.”

“ARGUS?” He repeated then nodded grimly. “Wish I could say I was surprised; anyone else?”

“She mentioned a group; The Themyscirians.”

He frowned. “The Themyscirians? Why does that sound familiar?”

“If you ever took Greek Mythology it would,” she said easily. “Themyscira is the ancient mythological lost city of the Amazons.”

“Huh,” he said tilting his head back, the shadow of the Arrow fading for a moment. “I must have caught the name off an old episode of Xena, Warrior Princess.”

“You watched Xena?” She snickered.

He gave her a curious look, “Is that supposed to be funny or something?”

“No, it’s just something I told someone once about your chiropractor.”

“My chiropractor?” He asked dubiously, “I don’t have a chiropractor.”
“It’s just—never mind,” she muttered, then smiled, “So, big fan of chicks in leather with subtextually Sapphic friendships, huh?”

He gave her a slightly sheepish look, “Yeah, well, Tommy was convinced that Xena and Gabrielle were going to go all out naked love-fest at any minute and he used to make me watch it with him just in case.”

“So it was all Tommy’s fault, huh?” Felicity said as she reached out to rub his chest playfully.

“One hundred percent,” he said, settling her against him and tucking her head under his chin.

They lay there quietly for a long moment before she spoke, “What are we going to do?”

He placed a light kiss on her hair, “I don’t know. I have to think about it, but for now we’ll go clean up, slip back under the covers, and sleep, okay? Everything will still be waiting for us in the morning.”

They got out of bed reluctantly but this time they shared the shower, each one taking turns touching, kissing, and exploring the other without feeling the need for more. It was more about discovering the boundaries of new intimacy than the rush of sex. They toweled one another dry then slipped under the sheets, him pulling her into his arms for one last kiss before he shut his eyes.

She looked at his features in the soft glow of her bedside lamp, so much more relaxed than she had ever seen him despite all that was going on in their lives. For a moment, for just a split second as she looked at him, she let herself believe that everything might actually work out as long as they could maintain the trust they had built together.

But in order for that to happen she had to tell him about the other night. Even though he said that everything before this was in the past she needed to tell him for her own peace of mind.

She frowned and looked down at the duvet nervously “Oliver?”

“Hmm?” He mumbled.

“I have to tell you something and, I know you said it wouldn’t matter, but it does because I don’t want it to seem like I’m trying to hide anything.”

He inhaled sharply and opened one bleary eye, “What’s wrong, Baby?”

Felicity blinked, suddenly caught off guard, “You called me ‘Baby’.”

“Sure did,” Oliver smiled softly, closing his eyes again. “That’s your nickname, right?”

“Yeah,” she said feeling bashful suddenly. “I thought you decided to start calling me ‘sweetheart’ now?” She joked, biting her lip

“Who says I can’t call you both? I plan to go through lots and lots of endearments with you; honey, baby, sweetheart… I might even take ‘darling’ and ‘dear’ out for a spin, I haven’t decided yet. You might have to remind me to pick up a thesaurus so I don’t accidentally miss any,” he told her with a sleepy half-grin then opened his eyes again. “Is that okay? I mean, is it okay if I call you ‘Baby’ when we’re alone or does it make you uncomfortable?”

“Yeah,” she said softly. “Yeah, it’s okay. I mean, as long as you know that I’m still the same person I’ve always been.”
“I’m not ever going to forget that,” he told her, a quiet intensity behind his words. “What about you? Do you want to start calling me ‘Ollie’ now?” He asked her. “One slightly embarrassing childhood name for another?”

“No, not really,” she told him after a moment’s consideration. “You’ve always just been Oliver to me. I’ve never met ‘Ollie’ and I happen to like the person you are now.”

He opened his eyes again and shifted slightly so he could look her directly in the eye. His hand stroked over the side of her face before cupping her cheek, “I like that I’m ‘Oliver’ for you, but I kind of wish ‘Ollie’ had met ‘Baby’ a long time ago.”

“Why?” She asked, nuzzling her cheek against his hand.

“I think it would have inspired me to become ‘Oliver’ a lot sooner than I did. If I had met you back then I think my whole life might have changed for the better,” he said, stroking her cheekbone with his thumb. “I would have buckled down, taken more responsibility, maybe even…” Regret suddenly flashed across his expression, “Maybe if I had met you sooner I would’ve been able to have a relationship with Connor or, better yet, never have been the kind of guy who would use a girl the way I used his mother to begin with.” He kissed her forehead softly, “You could have fixed me a long time ago and made me a better man.”

“You can’t know that for sure,” she said, blushing slightly at the compliment.

“I can and I do,” he said quietly.

“You have always been a good man, Oliver,” Felicity told him. “Everything you feel guilt for; Laurel, Sandra, Connor, Sara, your mom—none of that is your fault.”

“Yes, it is. I--”

“No,” she said firmly as she cupped his cheek and forced him to look her in the eye. “My dad told me something the other day. He told me that I wasn’t responsible for anyone’s happiness but my own. He said that, even though I may want to fix everyone I care about, that not even the strongest of men could handle that much weight on their shoulders.” She ran her fingers across his jawline, “Stop blaming yourself for the past and start seeing yourself as the man the rest of us love and care about because you are a good man, Oliver.” She smiled, “You’re probably one of the best men I have ever known.”

“And you have a sweet heart, Felicity Smoak,” he said, giving her a lingering kiss. He pulled away from her and blinked down at her sleepily, “Come on; let’s just sleep and we can talk more tomorrow, okay?”

“But…” Felicity stopped and licked her lips. “See, I just—“

“Tomorrow,” he told her firmly, kissing her again. “Sleep first, everything else can wait, okay?”

She exhaled the breath she had been holding and nodded. “Okay.”

“Turn the light off, Baby,” he told her, settling back down into the pillow.

She turned away from him long enough to switch off her bedside lamp then snuggled in beside him and slept.
She awoke sometime later to see Olivier kneeling beside her fully dressed, “Hey.”

“Hey, what time is it?” She mumbled, reaching over to gaze blearily at her phone.

“Not quite 3:00 am,” he said quietly. “I didn’t want to leave without talking to you first.”

“Oh. Okay, yeah.” She blinked her eyes and winced as she turned on the lamp and the whole room became visible. She pulled the blankets towards her chest for warmth and ran hand over her rat’s nest
of curls, “Are you heading out?”

“Yeah, in a bit,” he said, straightening up so he could sit on the edge of the bed as she scooted up to lean against the headboard to give him room. He reached out to tuck a curl behind her ear gently. He then placed her leg that was outside the tangle of covers on his lap and ran his palm over her calf before settling his hand on her knee and squeezing it in an intimate gesture.

She reached out, placing her hand over his with a contented, if bleary, smile, “Are you coming back later? You know, if you come back tonight you could, um, bring a change of clothes with you,” she said quietly. “Not that I’m pressuring you or anything. I mean, I know this is new and I don’t want to seem—“

“Felicity,” he said, running his thumb across the back of her hand. He looked at her, his expression grim, “I won’t be coming back.”

For a second Felicity knew she couldn’t have heard right. She even had to blink her eyes a couple of times just to make sure she wasn’t still asleep, but then she looked at his expression and knew that this was not going to be a good day after all. She removed her hand from his light grasp.

“You don’t just mean tonight, do you?” She asked with a sinking feeling in her chest.

“No,” he confirmed.

“You said you were in,” she said, not accusingly, but with quiet confusion. “I repeatedly asked you not to say that if you weren’t sure and you told me we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“I was in,” he told her, shutting his eyes as if it pained him to admit it. “I’m sorry but I’ve been through it in my head and the only solution I can come up with is—“

“You’re going to tell me that you can’t come back because we can’t be together, aren’t you?” Felicity tilted her head slightly to the side. She felt numb but not surprised. “That it’s too dangerous for me, right?”

He nodded and they sat in silence for an extended moment…although for completely different reasons.

While Oliver was affixing his best ‘let them down easy’ face all Felicity could think is ‘Why does this keep happening to me?’ As subtlety as she could she slid her hand over to her other arm and gave herself a pinch.

Nope, I’m definitely awake.

She swept her eyes across the room.

And no hidden cameras either.

“Felicity, I didn’t want this for us. If I could, I’d ask you to stay; I’d try, but…I’m sorry, I can’t do this. We can’t do this.”

Un-fucking-believable. “Do I have bad breath?”

His mouth snapped shut and he looked at her. “No, why--?”

“Body odor?”

“What?” he asked, suddenly looking less grim and more confused.
“It’s the sex isn’t it?” She muttered to herself. “I should have bought a book or something—well, I did buy a book; a couple of books, but I don’t think they were very well written or accurate because this keeps happening to me and I know it’s not my personality. I have a great personality.”

“It’s not the sex, or body odor, or you,” Oliver said. “It’s—“

She held her hand up, stopping him mid-sentence. “I know this part, ‘It’s not you, Felicity, it’s me. The mission is too important and I can’t risk your safety by being with you’, right?”

“Yes!” He scowled in frustration, “I’ve spent all night thinking about it and if Isabel knows about the Arrow then it’s just a matter of time before she outs me or threatens to in order to get controlling interest in QC. I can’t risk you being here when that happens.”

She counted to five in her head because, well, frankly she didn’t feel like losing another phone by hurling it at someone’s head again. “Just so I’m clear; the reason we can’t be together is because of Isabel and for no other reason.”

He didn’t answer her right away, he just averted his eyes. After a second or two he took a breath and laid his hand back on her exposed knee and rubbed it in what she supposed was meant to be a comforting gesture but really, given the circumstances, came off more like he was trying to cop one last feel. As if he was saying, “Hey, yeah, I’m totally dumping you but I’m doing it nicely so that I might still be able to get back up in that later,” and, even though she knew he was feeling genuinely contrite, she really, really just wanted him to stop touching her right now.

Vigilantes, she thought, no sense of self-preservation at all.

“If it was just that…look, it’s not just Isabel; if what she told you is true then—“

“Then we’re blown,” she finished for him. Now get your hand off my knee, you mother…

She didn’t finish that thought because, even though she hadn’t been particularly fond of Oliver’s mother, she still believed in being honest and she doubted the affection Moira Queen had for her son ever ran in that particular direction.

Son of a bitch though? That worked.

“Exactly,” he said grimly. “Sooner or later they’re coming after us and you need to be as far away from the Arrow as possible when and if that happens. If you stay and Isabel sees that we’re involved then that will just motivate her to act even sooner.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

Barely.

“Which is something you knew about before we had sex,” Felicity said simply.

“What?” Oliver looked at her, his eyes narrowing.

His hand left her knee.

Yeah, I thought that would score a hit, she thought. “I said, you knew Isabel was gunning for us before we had sex just like you knew I was already leaving for Gotham when you showed up at my house last night.”

“What are you trying to say?” He asked angrily.
“Just what I said,” Felicity told him in a calm and reasonable tone. “None of this is news to either of us and yet you broke into my house last night, walked into my bedroom, staged a very effective seduction and consequently initiated the ubiquitous adult activities, gave me this heartfelt speech about how all the stuff you’re saying now was not going to be said even though—”

“Whoa! I did not set out to seduce you just so I could get laid and sneak off afterwards!” He said angrily getting up off the bed and facing her. “If that’s all it was I wouldn’t have even bothered to try to have this conversation with you to begin with!”

“Oliver, I’m not trying to accuse you of anything; I’m merely telling it like it is,” Felicity said simply.

“But that’s not how it is!” He told her. “Look, if you want to yell and scream at me then you can, I don’t blame you; but it doesn’t change anything!”

“I’m not yelling; you are. Which, when you think about it, is pretty shitty of you to do right now because I’m the one who’s being dumped,” she told him.

“I’m not dumping you!” He said, getting to his feet and pacing angrily. “Goddamn it, I did not set out to hurt you; that’s not what I wanted to do and you know that! At least you should know that!”

“Okay, but, once again, just to be clear; you want me to leave and not come back and you don’t want us to be together in a romantic or sexual way ever again,” she said slowly. “How is that not the same thing as being dumped?”

“It just isn’t!” He scrubbed his hand through his hair, “Dumping someone implies that your feelings about that person have changed and that’s not what’s happening here; nothing that’s happening right now is something I wanted to happen! But…” he pause with a grimace, his hands balled up at his sides angrily.

“But?” She prompted.

He shook his head once then looked at her, his eyes filled with regret, “But, yes; I’m ending this—now before we get in too deep. I’m sorry.”

There were so many things she could have said at that moment but her bladder just wasn’t up to it. Felicity swung her legs out of the bed and put on her nightgown that had fallen to the floor then stood up.

“Where are you going?” He asked.

“To the bathroom.”

“Why?” He asked trailing after her with a scowl.

“The same reason everyone else goes to the bathroom when they first wake up: I have to pee,” she said, shutting the door in his face and locking it behind her.

The minute she shut the door he tried the knob.

Oliver was nothing if not predictable.

“Open the door, Felicity,” he said in an aggrieved tone.

“Kind of busy,” she called out.

She could hear him as he leaned heavily against the door, “Please, just…open the door. I’m not
doing this to upset you; the last thing I wanted to do was cause you pain, but I don’t see any other choice. It’s best to end this now so that you can be safe. The last thing I had intended to do when I came over here last night was to make love to you but it happened and...” he sighed, “Just...just don’t cry, Felicity. This is hard enough for me as it is.” He paused, “Felicity?” He tried the door again. “Are you okay?”

She flushed and rolled her eyes as she got up from the pot to wash her hands, “I’m not crying or committing Jigai, I told you I had to pee!” She soaped up her hands quickly, rinsing and drying them before she opened the door to see him standing there. “See? No tears.”

“I—“ He opened his mouth to speak but she cut him off.

“Stop apologizing;” she said, holding up her hand to stem the flow of crap that, frankly, she just wasn’t up to hearing him repeat over and over this early in the morning. “We’re good; I told you last night that if you didn’t want to do this that we could just let it go without making it into a big thing.”

“That’s not—“ he started but she cut him off again.

“Stop!” She told him. “You’re off the hook! I’m not mad at you, I’m not upset; if anything I’m just irritated about the fact that I asked you repeatedly if this was a one night stand and you—“

“This was not a one night stand!” He growled.

Felicity looked at him askance, “I’m sorry, are you planning on making this a two-night stand, because I thought you were pretty clear just now on that particular point.”

“It’s not—“ he grimaced again and his nostrils flared, “Calling it a ‘one night stand’ cheapens what we shared and you know it. It was not a one night stand.”

Felicity paused to consider that, “No, no I’m pretty sure a one and done is technically a one night stand.” She shrugged, “But, whatever; I apologize if I made it sound cheap, okay? Technically this was my first real one night—uh, whatever this was, so forgive me if I’m not familiar the etiquette for these sorts of situations,” she said as she moved past him towards the bed.

“Look, I don’t blame you for being mad at me—“ He said, still trailing after her as she snatched her robe from the bed and slipped it over her shoulders. She shivered and he pulled her into his arms, “Felicity, don’t…it’s going to be okay.”

But she was only half-listening as she took in the chill of the room. “What?” She asked, narrowing her gaze at him. “I’m not scared, I’m cold.” She shivered again, “Oh God, are you freezing or is it just me?” She extricated herself from his embrace and wandered into the living room, stepping over the broken glass and pottery carefully as she was in her bare feet. “How good are you at making fires?” She asked, tossing a starter brick and a few seasoned logs she’d bought from the hardware store in the grate. She looked at the splintered remains of her wooden cutting board askance. “Do cutting boards burn or is there some reason I shouldn’t toss that sucker in here, too?” She turned back to him but he didn’t answer so she shrugged and tossed that in as well. “Oh well, better there than in the landfill.” She looked at all the glass and shattered plastic littering the floor. “Too bad I can’t do the same with that,” she muttered.

“You’re making a fire?” Oliver asked blankly as he walked over to her with a frown. “Right now in the middle of everything?”

“Yeah, it’s drafty in here,” she told him as she snatched the long fireplace lighter off the mantle and held it to the starter log. “You know, they show you the real wood burning fireplace and ohh and
ahh over it but what they don’t tell you is that it gets really fricking cold at night here and these things are not only drafty as hell but barely put out any heat. I thought about talking to the landlord and getting a ventless gas unit installed, but—“

“Felicity,” he said reaching for her shoulders and pulling her up so she was looking him in the eye. “It’s okay to be upset with me but ignoring it isn’t going to change anything.”

“I know,” she said wryly as he narrowed his eyes at her in disbelief. “Really Oliver, I’m fine.” She patted his chest in a comforting gesture, “I told you; we’re cool. You can go now, really. It’s not like I haven’t been in this situation before.”

He took his hands from her shoulders and jammed one in his pocket as he ran the other through his hair. He muttered something unintelligible under his breath as he took a few steps away from her, then rounded back, his expression a mixture of agitation, wounded pride, and confusion, “No, damn it! You do not get to play it like this; not with me! I did not set out to hurt you! This isn’t me thanking you for sex and leaving cash on the nightstand! I’m trying to protect you; I’m not Bruce!”

She snorted and laughed before slapping her hand over her mouth. She tried to get it under control but then she caught the look on his face. Anger, frustration, and comical confusion warred with each other to the point that she could almost picture a cartoon dialog bubble appearing mid-air with the word ‘D’OH’ coming out of his mouth.

And that was the straw that broke the camel’s back. She lost it.

She started laughing so hard tears ran out of the corners of her eyes and she literally had to grab her stomach.

His face turned red and he crossed his arms over his chest defensively until she had better control over herself before saying, “Are you done?”

She gave another short bark of laughter before finally wiping her eyes with her hands and working out the last of her giggles while he worked on destroying thousands of dollars’ worth of dental work by grinding his teeth into oblivion. “I’m good,” she said at last, her mouth still twitching. “It’s just if you knew why I was laughing…” she snickered.

“Want to explain to me why you find the idea of Isabel knowing our secret so damned funny? Or do you think that I’m exaggerating the danger you’re in just to; what? Get in your pants? I’m trying to save your life, goddamn it!” Oliver practically growled. “This isn’t fun for me! I didn’t orchestrate all of this just so I could get laid! She could send us all to prison if she’s got enough evidence—all of us, including you!”

“Sorry—sorry; you’re right.” She sobered up and heaved a sigh as she waved him off, “But, for the record, I made my peace with the possibility that I could wind up in handcuffs years ago. Hell, prison was actually the least of my worries compared to what went down when we faced Slade so forgive me if jail time doesn’t hold the same weight it used to.”

“Well it should!” He said forcefully as he towered above her. “And I haven’t forgotten what happened with Slade. I thought—“ he stopped, a shadow passing over his expression. “I think about what could have happened to you almost every single day. I remember watching you face down Slade knowing he was going to kill you and then when he put his hands on you…” He closed his eyes and swallowed convulsively. He rubbed a hand over his mouth before looking at her again, “For the last six months I’ve gone to bed every night thinking about the look on your face, seeing you stare him down and not being able to do a damn thing about it.” He shook his head, “I still don’t know how you survived that; you shouldn’t have survived it, but we—you got lucky.” His
expression changed into that of the Arrow and his voice deepened. “Just because you came out of that alive doesn’t make you invulnerable, Felicity. I can’t face that again. I can’t stand by and see you destroyed by something that is my fault and I can’t protect you if this goes public; in fact, the worst thing I could do is be anywhere near you if that happens. This is about me, just me, and I won’t risk your life or your freedom ever again even if that means sending you away and not seeing you anymore. If you go to Gotham then maybe, just maybe, Isabel will forget about you.”

“Out of sight, out of mind?” Felicity asked wryly. “That’s your plan?”

“So far,” he said in a voice that was neither the Arrow nor Oliver but a mixture of the two.

She arched an amused eyebrow at his angry posturing, “It’s called ‘extradition’, Oliver. One call to Gotham PD and I’m in handcuffs either way.”

“It’s better than your odds would be if you stay here. If you are out of the picture then maybe Isabel will no longer see you as a threat or, at the very least, it will give you some plausible deniability if we do get caught.” He moved a little closer, his voice softening as he stroked her cheek with his hand. “In Gotham you have resources at your disposal I just can’t offer you anymore. Here you’re Felicity Smoak, Executive Assistant to a CEO who likes to arrow criminals; there you’re Felicity Fox, daughter of one of the most trusted men in the country. Your dad’s reputation might protect you or, if not, the distance might buy you enough time that you can get out of the country for a while; something, anything, just as long as you’re not here.”

There were all sorts of things she could have said to him at that moment. She considered all of them before deciding on just one, “Okay.”

“Okay?” He repeated with a frown.

“Yeah, I get it. Thanks,” she told him with a casual shrug. She pulled out of his grasp and headed for the kitchen. As she stepped over the remains of her coffee pot, she turned to him. “Pot’s broken but I might have tea if you want some.”

He looked at her, his hands still suspended in midair as he tracked her progress. “Felicity,” he said warily, “Are you…are we okay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t we be?” She asked with a frown as she turned on the kettle.

The look of wary confusion changed to one of suspicion. “Are you sure because you’re not taking this the way I expected you to,” he said as he approached her counter.

She raised a sardonic eyebrow, “Is this your way of asking me if I’ve flipped my lid because I’m not crying and wailing or throwing dishes at your head?”

“Frankly yes,” he said, eying her askance.

She yawned, leaning against the far counter, “Eh, been there, done that and frankly I’m out of tears and small appliances so I figured I’d give calm acceptance a shot instead.”

Oliver just looked more confused than ever, “I’m still not following.”

She smiled at him and tilted her head to the side, “Oliver, I knew when and if we ever slept together that there was a better than even chance you’d give me the ‘it’s the mission and I want you safe’ speech. You’re not my first vigilante, remember?” She turned and grabbed a mug from the cabinet muttering under her breath, “Already heard that one twice.”
“What?” He said, catching some but not all of what she said.

“Never mind,” she said with a sigh. “The point is,” she said as she dropped a teabag in her mug, “you’re a hero and heroes only care about the mission. All any of you have room for is the mission and the rest of us are just bit players in it,” she said drolly. “Like I said; not my first rodeo. I’ve been on this ride before—a few times, in fact. I already know all the speeches and the arguments and I’m just not up to dealing with it again at three in the morning.”

“What do you mean you’ve done this before?” He asked suspiciously.

She ignored him, “All you need to know is this: I’m good. I’m a big girl, Oliver. Got my big girl panties on and everything.” She paused and looked down at herself, “Well, no, no I don’t, but who wears panties under pajamas anyway? The whole point of pajamas is to be comfortable and not constricted yet in all the romance novels women always seem to go to bed in sexy lace thongs and underwire. How is that comfortable? Seriously?” She shook her head, “Anyway, my point is this: Angst is for tweens and Twi-hards and I’m not looking to make you into my one true sparkly vampire. We had sex and it was fantastic,” she said sincerely. “Seriously, you should bottle that stuff, but I’m not going to fall apart so,” she waved vaguely in the direction of her front door, “we’re cool.”

“Damn it, Felicity,” he yelled, losing his temper, “I didn’t decide this just to make you upset or to stroke my own ego!”

“I know that,” she replied in a reasonable tone. “I know you genuinely care about me and that all of this is horribly upsetting, it’s just not unexpected. You’d know that too if you weren’t being such a, well,” she scrunched her face as she searched for the right wording, “pardon the pun, but ‘drama queen’.”

“A what?” He asked, more than a little outraged.

“It’s true,” she shrugged. The kettle whistled so she turned off the burner and poured hot water over the leaves. “All of you vigilante types are,” she said scrunching up her nose and putting the kettle back down before turning back to him, “I mean, you take something tragic and horrible then use it as an excuse to put on costumes and masks so you can jump from rooftop to rooftop with bows and arrows or throwing stars in the shape of bats and push everyone away because, well, it’s for their own good. Normal people can just say, ‘Hey, I don’t do commitment’ and leave it at that, but you guys always have to be so melodramatic about it.”

“Melodramatic’?!” He repeated.

“Yes; melodramatic. In fact, some days it’s like living in a masked vigilante telenovela. All of it, soup to nuts, it’s just so over the top,” she confirmed. “I mean, I get that you’re doing good and that you’ve gone through stuff that would crush a lesser man; I’m not trying to lessen or diminish that at all, but still.” She paused, “All I’m trying to say is that I get it so you don’t have to pull out all the stops for me. I’d rather you just pull the Band-Aid off in one good rip than spend the entire morning drowning me in cruel kindnesses. I mean, no offence, but I have stuff to do and this,” she gestured between the two of them, “it’s kind of eating into my day. You can just tell me that, while you like me a lot, one good romp in the hay does not a forever make and trust me to handle that.”

“That’s not---!”

She held up one finger, cutting him off again, “I know, I understand: This is a serious situation and Isabel is evil and has it in for all of us. I got that, in fact I called that forever ago. You could have just listened to me in the first place and skipped all the drama but you didn’t. I asked you several times
last night if this was how it was going to go specifically to avoid this whole scene but, no, it had to play out this way because that’s what you guys really get off on: the drama, the rush.” She took another sip before continuing, “Well, while I’m very grateful for the multiple orgasms, frankly I could have just as easily skipped it. I was already headed out of town before all of this.”

“So that’s it,” he said flatly, his expression livid. “You want to pretend like nothing I’ve said or done matters to you? You think I’m being a selfish prick because I’m trying to do the right thing by you even if it means hurting you in the short term? Sorry, but I’m not going to change my mind!”

“I’m not asking you to,” she told him.

“No, you’re just trying to manipulate me into doing it,” he said flatly.

“No, I’m not,” she said giving him a ‘go to hell’ look as she drank her tea.

“Yes, you are and I won’t allow it!”

She raised her lips from her mug, the burn of anger beginning to set in again. Allow; nothing burned her cookies worse than that particular word. She didn’t like it in a 404 screen and she certainly didn’t like it when it was applied to her personal decisions. “Listen, the only person in the room accusing anyone of anything right now is you. If you think my leaving is the best course of action then I’ll leave; I was already in the process of doing that and I can take care of myself. I’m not mad at you, I don’t blame you, and I don’t harbor any feelings of resentment towards you. That said, I won’t allow you to use me to fuel this angst ridden guilt-fest of yours because I own whatever happened here, just like I own everything that has happened since the minute you brought that laptop into my office. I’m not a victim. I’m not someone you’ve wronged. I’m not Laurel accusing you of whatever the hell she likes to accuse you of on any given day of the week, I’m not Sara, or Helena, or McKenna, or Sandra, or any of the other women you torture yourself over. You don’t get to add my name to that list because I’m the one who was in control of this the entire time, not you.”

“Meaning what?” Oliver bit out angrily.

“Meaning that, whether you like it or not, I’m not the helpless little blonde in the corner. I’m not crushed or devastated, and I’m not cringing and wailing over Isabel or whatever boogie monster is hiding under my bed because I’ve been doing this long enough to know better than to go off on a panic. I’ve been at this for almost five and a half years; while you were on Hell Island I was rocking coms with Batman, so excuse me if I come off as being flippant about the amount of danger I’m in since all this stuff has pretty much become routine for me.” She shook her head, “See? This is why I didn’t tell you about my past. Among other things, I didn’t want you to feel insecure.” she put down her mug and faced him.

“That’s a load of bullshit!” Oliver burst out, “No one said anything about you being a helpless little —“ He shook his head as words seemed to fail him and began to fidget and pace slightly, “Goddamn it! You—” he pointed his finger at her and growled, “And I’m not feeling insecure just because you were Batman’s weekend tech support! Where the hell are you even getting this shit?” He raged.

“Maybe I’m wrong then,” she shrugged.

“Yes, you are!” He told her hotly.

“The fact remains though that you aren’t sending Dig or Roy to Gotham and they’re just as much in the line of fire as I am, right?” She asked, “So…why am I the only one hearing this speech?”

“You know why!” He told her.
“Pretend I don’t,” she said easily. “Just give me a reason, any reason, since I’m wrong and our having sex last night obviously has nothing to do with why I’m hearing all of this right now.”

“You—I—stop doing that!” He growled.

“Doing what?” She asked innocently in a way that she knew would drive him out of his skull.

“You know what!” He snapped.

“I asked a simple question, that’s all.”

“No, you didn’t,” he shot back. “You want me to say that the reason I’m ending this and sending you away is because we slept together and now I’m running scared.”

“That’s a theory,” she admitted. “And you did happen to mention something along those lines last night as I recall.”

“Well if that’s the theory you’re operating under it’s the wrong one!”

“Okay then,” she said.

“Good!” He shot back. “And you know that this isn’t about me; this is about Isabel and the fact that she targeted you specifically; not Diggle and certainly not Roy!”

“So if Roy had been taken to lunch instead of me then he’d be going to Gotham instead?” She asked.

“No—I mean—Stop twisting everything because I’m not getting into this with you!” He said, his cheeks darkening with anger. “You’re going to Gotham and that’s it!

“Fine.”

“Fine!”

“I guess I’m going to Gotham, then,” she said easily.

“Yes, you are,” he told her. “Where you’ll be safe.”

“Huh, first time I’ve ever heard anyone refer to Gotham, crime capital of the world, as safe,” she said with a contemplative frown as his jaw clenched. “Oh well, I’m sure I’ll figure something out; maybe find a bodyguard or something.”

“Or something,” he repeated through gritted teeth.

“Maybe I’ll get my own Diggle,” she told him. “Or better yet, my own on-call vigilante to save me from the big bad since, you know, I’m incapable of taking care of myself without some costumed hero constantly coming to my rescue and telling me what’s best for me even if I don’t happen to agree.”

“Or maybe you’ll keep your head down and stay away from Isabel, Stellmoor, or anything related to Batman because, in this case, going to Gotham and keeping your head down is what’s best for you!” He said angrily.

“Hmm, maybe,” she shrugged watching his expression grow even more enraged. “Thanks for the lovely time and the chat but I’ve got a busy day ahead of me; you know, calling the movers, running errands, that sort of thing.” She moved around the counter and walked over to him, throwing her arms around his neck and placing a small kiss on his clenched jaw. “Good bye, Oliver, it was fun!
See you around some time.” She spun around and waved at him over her shoulder as she headed for her room. “Do me a favor and lock up on your way out since you obviously know the door codes.”

She kept walking until she heard him stomp out of her house, slamming the door behind him. She stopped then, placing her hand on the wall, and slowly fell to her knees as the anger and bravado suddenly dissipated leaving only the pain behind.

She leaned against the wall in the hallway for a while but she didn’t cry. Well, maybe a few tears escaped, but it wasn’t the gut wrenching sobs from the other day that had nearly made her sick, just a few bitter tears borne from frustration and stress.

It was like the air had been sucked out of her lungs and her legs wouldn’t work. She was numb. This had happened to her twice; three times actually, but twice in a matter of days. She felt her chest constrict and she whimpered before forcing herself to breathe.

In and out, inhale exhale. She staggered to her feet and made it to her bed, collapsing on it and trying to ignore the lingering smell of Oliver’s cologne. She reached for her phone and dialed the familiar digits without having to think about it.

“Felicity? What the hell time is it?”

“Tam,” she managed with a sob.

“What’s wrong?” Tam’s voice went from sleepy to instantly alert. “What happened? Are you okay? Do you need me to come out there?”

“Is that Felicity?” She heard a familiar male voice ask sleepily.

“Shut up, I’m trying to hear—Felicity, what’s wrong?”

“Is that Tim?” Felicity sniffled, suddenly distracted.

“Yes, but—never mind that now; what’s going on?”

“I thought you two broke up?” She asked in confusion, her voice hitching with unshed tears. “You guys are back together?”

“No, we’re not together! Tim just stopped by to borrow a cup of sex, okay?”

“Yeah, I did.” She heard Tim say in a sleepy yet still mockingly self-satisfied way.

“Shut up, you jack ass! Something’s wrong with Felicity!”

“What?” She heard a scramble for the phone and then it was Tim’s voice on the line, “Felicity, what’s wrong? Did another one of those earthquake machines go off or something? Do you need me and Tam to come to Starling City to get you? I can call Alfred and have the jet ready in less than thirty minutes.”

“No! No, please, I just—I just need to talk to Tam!” She said, her voice far more high pitched and whiny than she wanted it to be but the thought of being rescued by yet another vigilante, even if it was Tim, was too much to handle at the moment.

“Give me the phone!” She heard Tam say along with the sound of covers shifting in the background.

“I’m putting it on speakerphone.” She heard a click and then both their voices became clear. “What’s going on?”
“Tim, let me talk to her!” She heard her snap. “Baby, what’s wrong?” She asked in a purposefully calm and measured tone.

“I fucked up,” Felicity said, feeling shell-shocked. “I really fucked up and I don’t know what to do.”

“First things first; are you hurt?” Tam asked.

“Well, I’m not bleeding or anything if that’s what you’re asking,” Felicity said as she grabbed the box of tissues and blew her nose loudly.

“What happened?”

“Bruce showed up—“

“Yeah, now everything is beginning to make sense!” Tim said with a bitter edge.

“Tim, leave your own issues with Bruce out of this, it’s Felicity’s turn.”

She hiccupped and started again, “Bruce found out that I’ve been working with the Arrow and—“

Their voices erupted out of the receiver.

“Wait, you’re working with the Arrow?”

“Since when?”

“For a while now,” she said, reaching for her water bottle and taking a sip so she could wash away the salty taste in her mouth. “He showed up and things got bad. He made threats and, um, things might have gotten out of hand between us.”

“What do you mean?” Tim asked dangerously.

“Not—not like that,” Felicity said quickly then backtracked. “Well, maybe a little but it was nothing. That’s not the point—“

“Felicity, did Bruce hit you?” Tamara asked aghast.

“No, he didn’t hit me! He just left a few bruises when he grabbed me! He was upset—“

“What do you mean he grabbed you?”

“I’ll kill him,” she heard Tim hiss and then there was the sound of bedsprings as he presumably got out of bed to get dressed. “Is he still in Starling City?”

“No, stop! Wait!” She took a deep breath, “Just let me talk, okay? This is hard enough as it is.”

She heard Tam murmur something to Tim before speaking again, “It’s okay Baby, we’re listening. What happened?”

“Bruce came to Starling because he thought I was in danger and suspected I was working with The Arrow. He was on a tear about the whole thing and he wanted me to give up his identity so he could find him. It was stupid, like him beating the Arrow to a pulp would keep me safe or something,” she rolled her eyes, her nose still running like a faucet. “He confronted me and I tried talking to him but he wouldn’t listen so I told him I was the Arrow just to shut him up.”

Silence fell on the other end of the line.
“Um, Felicity? I could be wrong but last I heard the Arrow was a dude,” Tim said slowly.

“Yeah, well, I sort of told him that I was the actual brains behind everything and that the Arrow was just one of several men I had recruited.”

“Is that true?” Tam asked, sounding somewhat impressed.

“No, but the point is it could be! Then Bruce went all Bat and grabbed me and started yelling. Some of my team came up to stop him and I managed to defuse the situation before things went south but before Bruce left he threatened me.”

“What did he say?” A dangerous edge had crept back into Tim’s voice.

“He—uh, he said that unless I left Starling City and basically placed myself under his supervision back in Gotham that he would turn me in to the authorities,” she told them quietly.

“Asshole,” Tam swore. “Is that all of it?”

“No,” she said, clearing her throat. “The next day he showed up at my place to apologize for grabbing me so roughly and one thing led to another…” She couldn’t finish the sentence.

“And then what happened?”

“Dumb ass!” She heard the sound of a smack as Tam hissed again at Tim, “They obviously had sex!”

“You and Bruce had sex?” She could practically hear Tim’s jaw hit the floor.

“It’s not like it’s the first time,” Tam huffed.

“You and Bruce had sex before?” Tim asked incredulously, his voice squeaking like a thirteen year old boy.

“What did he do to mess it up this time?” She asked ignoring her (sort of) boyfriend.

“Same thing he did last time,” Felicity said miserably.

“Son of a bitch,” Tam growled. “Well, if Tim doesn’t kill him, I will.”

“What happened? What did he do last time?”

“Tim!” She snapped on the other end of the phone. “Either shut up and listen or go put on the coffee!”

“I’m shutting up now! Go on, Felicity,” Tim said quickly.

“Anyway, some other stuff happened and I had to get back in touch with,” she paused, “um, the Arrow about it even though he was upset with me too—“

“What does Oliver have to be mad about?”

Felicity started in surprise, “How did you--?!”

“Please, like you’re the only person in this family who’s slept with a billionaire vigilante; once you go Bat you never go back. Besides, Oliver is the only guy you ever seemed to talk about besides Bruce.”
“Wait, billionaire vigilante? Oliver, as in Oliver Queen? Oliver Queen is the Arrow?” The pitch in Tim’s voice rose excitedly.

“Tim,” her sister said warningly.

“Tim, you can’t tell Bruce, understood?” Felicity said sharply.

“I wouldn’t tell Bruce to go jump in the lake if his ass was on fire,” Tim said wryly.

“Anyway,” she sighed, suddenly exhausted, “turns out that Isabel Rochev—wait, you remember me telling you about her?”

“Yeah, you called her the ‘Cyrillic Succubus’ and said she put the ‘Puta’ in ‘Putin’, although you were really mixing your metaphors there.”

“Yeah, well, she invited me to lunch and told me that Stellmoor International knew about me and that Oliver was the Arrow and that they wanted to recruit me to lead a team of female vigilantes they were putting together.”

“Whoa,” Tam breathed from her end. “That’s actually kind of cool.”

“That’s not the point! The point is that she knows about Oliver and the Arrow!”

“Yeah, yeah, I got all that but think about it?” Tam said excitedly, brushing away Felicity’s concerns like they were nothing. “You leading a team of kick-ass girl masks? I would so love to help you with that. Think you could get them to offer me a spot, too?”

“Tam!” She growled in irritation, “She could expose us—me and Oliver both!”

“Yeah, but if she wanted to expose you wouldn’t she have just done that by now? I mean, why even bother offering you a job if that was her end game?” Tam pointed out in a reasonable tone. “I know you don’t like her but do you think her job offer is legitimate? Do you trust her?”

Felicity gave a humorless bark of laughter, “I definitely do not trust that woman but, to be honest, I have no idea if her offer was real or not.” She took a moment. “I don’t know what to think anymore. I guess I never stopped to think about it like that.” She snorted, “I have to give her credit though; at least if I had taken her up on her offer of sex I doubt she would have turned around the next day and given me the ‘it’s for your own good’ dump speech.”

Tim made a strangled sound, “This woman tried to get you to have sex with her?”

“She didn’t try, she just offered,” Felicity said, shutting her eyes as she rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“What are you doing with my tablet?” She heard Tam ask.

“Nothing.” Tim said quickly, “Just, uh, looking up Isabel Rochev.”

“Why?”

“I’m just trying to get a visual, y’know, so I can picture everything more clearly.”

“Give me that!” She heard Tam snatch her tablet away from him. “That’s my sister, you perv!”

“Well, she’s not my sister,” she heard him mumble.

She could practically hear the sound of her sister glaring at him. “Finish the story, Felicity.”
Felicity took another centering breath, “Oliver was angry because I never told him that I’d worked with Batman and we’d had an argument so I wasn’t keen on talking to him again but I knew I couldn’t just blow this off. I called him and told him we had to meet and he made an ass out of himself. He kept me waiting for almost three hours and when I finally told him what she said he laughed at me; told me I was imagining things.”

“What a dick!” Tam spat out. “I hope you showed him just where he could stuff those arrows of his.”

“Not in so many words but I let him know he could go straight to hell for all I cared and left. He showed up at my place a couple of hours later to apologize and offered to hear me out and, well…oh God!” She moaned.

“You didn’t,” Tam said.

“Didn’t what?”

“Felicity, tell me you didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?” Tim asked again in confusion.

“You did, didn’t you?” Tam breathed.

“What did she do?”

“Oh my God, you are such a slut!” Tam practically crowed.

“Oh my God, I am!” Felicity wailed.

“What? What did I miss?”

“When?” Tam gushed.

Felicity flopped face first in her pillow and groaned before lifting her head to answer weakly, “Bruce was Saturday and Oliver…a few hours ago.”

“Oh. My. God!” Tam howled, “I can’t believe my baby sister went from losing her virginity in the Batcave to practically having a threesome with Batman and the Arrow!”

“Felicity had sex for the first time with Bruce in the Batcave?” Tim asked scandalized. “Please tell me it was on a day I wasn’t there. Wait,” he paused, “did you say ‘threesome’?”

“How was it?” Tam asked excitedly, “I mean, this is the only other guy you’ve ever been with besides Bruce; was it good or are you still hung up on tall, dark, and grim?”

“I don’t know,” Felicity whined, “It was good but I don’t know what I feel anymore! Besides, it doesn’t really matter.”

“No.” Tam breathed. “Oh no.”

“Yeah,” she whimpered.

“Tell me he didn’t.”

“He did,” she confirmed morosely.
“What? What am I missing now?” Tim asked, completely lost in their conversation.

“Just that Oliver is as big a shit as Bruce is apparently,” Felicity heard a smack on the other end of the phone.

“Ow!” Tim yelped, “What the hell?! What did you hit me for? What did I do?”

“Because you’re a man and belong to the Dumbasses in Masks Club, that’s why!”

“Damn it, that really hurt,” he whined.

“It’s not Tim’s fault, it’s mine. Oh God, what am I going to do?” She wailed.

“Well, did you at least yell at him?”

“No.”

“Throw something at his head?”

“Tried that with Bruce and now I don’t have anything to make coffee in.”

“Well what did you do when he gave you his stupid little ‘I run around in a costume and can’t date you even though we just had sex’ speech?”

“T-I—“ She stuttered, “I laughed at him!” Then she completely lost it and the waterworks started in earnest.

As she sobbed into her pillow she heard Tim in the background ask in a sotto voice, “She laughed at him? I don’t get it.”

“Tim, go make the damn coffee!” Tam ordered him and Felicity could hear Tim grumble as he made his way out of the room. “Tim’s gone—finally. Are you okay, Baby?”

“No,” Felicity said in a wobbly voice. “You weren’t thinking.”

“Honey, please. Trust me; that’s not the mission that’s coming, not unless ‘mission’ is Vigilante code for ‘dick’.”

“No,” Felicity said in a wobbly voice. “I don’t know why I did that. I mean, I get that he was just trying to keep me safe but he said almost the same thing Bruce did and then when I told him that, he said that he was nothing like Bruce and I lost it because—because they’re practically the exact same person,” she began crying again. “Oh God, what does that make me? I had sex with two men who are exactly the same and yet I’m crying my eyes out because both of them dumped me right after having sex! What was I thinking?”

“You weren’t thinking,” Tam told her. “You were going with your heart. Unfortunately for you, Bruce and Oliver were going with their penises instead.”

“That’s not fair,” Felicity sniffled as she reached blindly for another tissue. “I know they care about me, it’s just that the mission always comes first for them—“

“Honey, please. Trust me; that’s not the mission that’s coming, not unless ‘mission’ is Vigilante code for ‘dick’.”

“Maybe—it’s just me?” Felicity moaned. “Maybe there’s just something about me that makes them think it’s okay to stomp my heart into a bloody pulp because, hey, I’m the one who keeps letting them in, right? No one forced me to drop my panties, I did that.” She sat up straight, “Oh God Tam, I am a slut, aren’t I? I’m a hero groupie; I’m just some easy lay for anyone in a mask.”

She heard Tim walk back into the room, “Brought the coffee, no need to thank me or anything.”
Tam ignored him, “You’re not a slut or a mask groupie. Two men in four years does not make you a slut. Trust me, I’ve slept with way more people than you have and I’m not a slut.”

“Wait, what?” She heard Tim say, “Who else have you slept with?”

“Seriously Tam, this is sick! It’s like the only people I seem to attract are people who think it’s okay to dress up in costumes and blow things up! Next thing you know I’ll be sleeping with Dick or, God forbid, Tim!”

“Hey! Since when is sleeping with me worse than sleeping with Bruce?” Tim asked in a mildly hurt tone.

“You’d never sleep with Dick because he has that weird fetish for tall redheads and, trust me; you do not want to sleep with Tim.”

“Why not?” Tim asked, obviously insulted.

“You talk too much and you’re selfish in bed.”

“I am not!” He said in an injured tone.

“The other day when we were in bed and you came first you said, ‘oops’, giggled like it was funny, then rolled over and started snoring.”

“I was tired and—and—and Felicity doesn’t need to hear about that stuff!” Tim blustered.

“Are you still coming home?” Tam asked, ignoring him.

“Yeah, don’t have much choice really,” Felicity said sadly.

“Some things are private, damn it,” Tim continued to mutter to himself. “And I made up for it last night, thank you very much! I’m like the king of foreplay now.”

“If you want to stay in Starling City then don’t let Bruce bully you into coming home.”

“That’s just it, I want to come home,” she said hollowly. “I’m just so sick and tired of all this crap. I need a break.”

“Then come home, screw the rest of them! You can stay with me until you get a place of your own. Or don’t, just stay here and Tim can sleep on the couch.”

“Hey!”

“Dad’s going to want me to stay with him for a while but thanks.” Felicity said, the tightness in her chest loosening a bit. “But hey, it’s okay, it’s not like my love life could possibly sink any further down the toilet, right?”

“Sure it could.”

“Shut up, Tim. You’re not helping.”

“I’m just saying. I mean have you seen daytime TV lately? Now those people have problems.” He snickered, “Oh man, can you imagine what would happen if Felicity got pregnant and had to wait to see if the baby came out in a green hood or a pair of bat ears?”

“That’s not funny! Besides, Felicity would never be stupid enough to let something like that
happen.” Tam told him, “I gave her the whole banana and condom demo when she was twelve.”

Felicity slapped her hand over her mouth and moaned.

“Crap.”

The tinkling bell over the door to the pharmacy sounded and Felicity looked over to see the same older woman behind the counter that she had talked to the other day.

“Hi sweetie, you still feeling bad? Aisle 2.”

“No, um,” Felicity walked over to the counter, her cheeks flaming.

“Oh. Oh honey,” the older woman looked at her, shook her head, sighed then reached behind her for a familiar pastel box. Before she gave it to her though, she fixed her with a stern eye, “Okay my darling, not to make you feel bad or anything, but we’ve been down this road before. I think it’s time you and I got together and discussed a few other options, don’t you?”

“Yeah, okay, just—just give me a box of whatever,” Felicity said, resigning herself to fate.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it,” the woman said, smiling kindly. “And don’t you feel embarrassed about protecting yourself, not in this day and age. Now what kind do you want?”

“I don’t know,” Felicity said with a frown. “I’ve never actually bought any before.”

“Never?” The woman asked, her penciled-on eyebrows lifting in surprise.

“I’m not—I haven’t—” Felicity flushed crimson, “I’m not really used to this kind of thing. Believe it or not this has been a very unusual week for me...” She rolled her eyes, “Unusual; that’s putting it mildly,” she muttered. “I mean, I know how they work,” she said quickly. “It’s pretty obvious, right? Plus there was this whole demonstration my sister did with a banana...” She dropped her head into her hands, “Just shoot me and put me out of my misery already,” she groaned.

“Oh darling, don’t worry about it; I got a whole aisle full of baby formula and diapers that says you’re not the first good girl to ever get confused about how to disarm a schmeckle. The point is that you’re here now and we’re going to get you better prepared for the next time one of those little petselehs creep up on you, fishtais?” The woman nodded knowingly and stuck her head out so she could do a quick visual sweep of the store. “Okay bubeleh,” she said as she opened the little half door and stepped out onto the floor. “You follow me. There’s no other customers so you and I can have a nice little chat, okay? Just us girls.”

She led her down an aisle with a large locked hard plastic case. Inside was a huge selection of brightly colored packages, creams, liquids, and other items that were all dedicated to one thing.

“There’s so many,” Felicity gulped.

“You bet; biggest selection in town!” She said proudly. “Now, do you have any allergies?”

“Um, nuts?” Then stopped to slap her hand over her mouth when the old woman began to snicker. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Of course not, bubeleh, but I’m still using that one tomorrow night. Jokes about der baitsen always go over big with the boys on the Pride planning committee. Now,” she said getting down to
business, “do you have any latex allergies?”

“No. Well, my skin kind of gets red and irritated when I use adhesive latex bandages but I think that’s mostly because I have really sensitive skin.”

“Hmm,” the woman, Roz she reminded herself, seemed to ponder that for a moment. “Well, just to be safe let’s look at the non-latex ones first. I, personally, prefer those anyway. They’re thinner and they transfer body heat better.” She tapped at the plexi-glass, “Now this brand is made from natural lambskin which I never, ever recommend to anyone because it’s not good at preventing STDs or pregnancy but I keep it around because some people still prefer them. Yeder menst hot zein aigeneh meshugass; eh, but what are you going to do? For you I recommend either polyurethane or polyisoprene. What size do you need?”

They come in sizes? Felicity goggled. “Um, I don’t know. I’m not…I don’t…” She reluctantly held her hands apart in a rough estimation, her cheeks flaming. “About this…” her voice trailed off as she saw the look on the other woman’s face. “That’s not what you meant, is it?”

“No, but it’s handy knowledge to have and mazel tov, by the way!”

“Oh God,” she said hiding her face in her hands again and letting out a sob of humiliation.

She patted Felicity’s hand soothingly, “Don’t worry, my darling; you can’t shock me. I may look like an old lady to a young girl like you but back in the 60’s and 70’s this whole neighborhood was like one big orgy. There was so much tits and ass flying around my apartment it’s amazing I ever got anything done.”

Felicity buried her face in her hands. Trust her to find the world’s most inappropriate pharmacist.

“Okay,” she mumbled.

“Since you’ve got a big one on your hands we’ll go ahead and get these,” she flashed her the package as she unlocked the case. “They make it easier on the big fellas. And,” she said reaching for a bottle of viscous liquid, “you’ll need this.”

Felicity looked at the bottle of lube and swallowed. “Um, I don’t—I, um…”

“I know you probably don’t need it, darling, a nice healthy girl like you, but trust me when I say that some days it helps; especially when you’re taking down a Clydesdale. Besides,” she winked at her, “it’s my treat.”

“Thank you,” she said feebly as she followed the other woman back to the checkout.

Felicity got back to her bungalow a little after 11 am, her little white pharmacy bag in hand. As she pulled up the first thing she noticed was all the boxes stacked up on her porch and the moving van outside. She slowly made her way to her door where several men were packing up her things.

“What?” She goggled and instantly began dialing Diggle as she rushed inside. “Who are you people? What are you doing in my house? Get out, all of you!”

Someone snatched her phone from her hand and she spun around to see Bruce standing in the archway leading to her kitchen. “I don’t think that will be necessary, do you?”
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She snatched her phone back and gave him the deadliest look in her arsenal. “What the hell are you doing in my house?! Get out!”

Bruce grimaced and turned to the six or so men who were standing in frozen shock as Felicity yelled at him. “Continue what you were doing,” he ordered.

“No, don’t!” Felicity said, turning to the workman who were now looking confused. “Out! All of you! Get out of my house right now!”

“Is there a problem here?” A rather nervous looking man with a clipboard came hurrying through the doorway toward them.

“You’re goddamn right there is!” Felicity turned to him, her blue eyes bright with anger. “This is my house and you people have no right to be here or to touch my things! Get out!”

“But—“ He turned to Bruce, “Mr. Wayne, what—?”

“Don’t talk to him!” Felicity snapped. “He doesn’t live here, I do! This is my house, my things, and if you and your men don’t put my stuff back in the next five minutes and leave I’m pressing charges!”

“But—but—“ the man stuttered, his eyes wide with fear and confusion.

She swung around to Bruce, “And that goes for you, too! You have no right to invade my life like this!”

Bruce looked at her steadily, seeming not the least bit perturbed by her outburst, “I think that I do have every right to be here or have you forgotten?”

She was beyond words at that point. Using everything John Diggle had ever taught her she hauled back and slapped him across the face as hard as she could.

Ow fuck, Felicity thought as pain radiated up her arm and her eyes began to water as she took in a shocked lungful of air. I think I broke something. Fuck fuck fuck oooow fuck!

Bruce didn’t move so much as an inch, his jaw as hard as granite. He turned calmly to the smaller man with the clipboard, “Leave us. Tell your men to take a break while I speak to Ms. Smoak in private.”

“Uh, yes sir,” he said quickly. “Everybody out! That’s lunch!”

Felicity turned on her heel; white pharmacy bag still clenched in her angry fist as she fled into her bedroom and slammed the door behind her, tossing the bag and her phone on the dresser. It was only then that she allowed the tears of pain to flood her eyes as she looked at the palm of her hand.

“Ooooow,” she moaned. “Ow ow ow ow ow…” she headed for her bathroom and held her burning hand under the cold water as she tentatively began feeling for broken bones.

“How badly did you hurt it?” Bruce asked from the doorway, his eyes glued to her hand under the faucet. A part of Felicity’s brain not completely overwhelmed by the stinging pain of her palm noted with some satisfaction the bright red outline of her hand on Bruce’s cheek.

“Get out!” She snapped at him.

He ignored her and walked into the room, his hand taking hers as he examined her rapidly purpling flesh. “I doubt you broke anything although you definitely bruised it. How’s your wrist?”
She pulled her hand away and shoved at his shoulder with the other one as hard as she could, “Get out! What part of ‘get out’ don’t you understand?!” She cried.

“Stop it!” He said angrily, holding her by the shoulders firmly but not with the same bruising pressure he’d used only a few nights previously.

“No!” She said, pushing past him and into her bedroom. She pointed to the door, “This is my house and you’re trespassing so get the hell out!”

“I have absolutely no intention of leaving until the workmen out there finish packing up this entire house and then you’re coming with me to the airport,” Bruce growled low in his throat.

“I’m not going anywhere with you!”

“Oh yes you are,” Bruce said as he advanced on her, a dangerous glint in his eye.

She glared at him, unwilling to give an inch, “You gave me a week!”

“Things change,” he shot back. “I have to be back in Gotham for business and I’m not leaving Starling City without you.”

“So you think that makes it okay for you to just go back on your word and bring strangers into my home without asking?” She asked, her eyes flashing with hellfire.

“If I hadn’t hired the movers you never would have and you know it,” he threw back.

“For your information I was planning on doing that today!”

He arched a superior eyebrow at her protestations, “You’ve known you were leaving since Friday and you still haven’t even told the landlord you were breaking the lease or called to arrange for a moving company to pack up the house.”

“How do you know?” She asked, eyeing him suspiciously. “Oh my God, did you bug my phones on top of everything else?”

“No, I merely had Barbara monitor all incoming and outgoing transmissions and I spoke to your landlord this morning when I was arranging for the movers. I paid the penalty and gave him the next two months’ rent to cover your leasing agreement until he finds new tenants and arranged for him to forward your mail. I also spoke to the car dealership and arranged to have your car returned later today,” he said in a perfectly composed manner, as though he’d every right to do so. “I went ahead and paid any penalties you incurred there as well, no need to thank me.”

“Thank you? Seriously? You expect me to thank you?” She asked incredulously.

“Expect it? No, I wouldn’t go that far,” he said in an almost amused fashion although his eyes still glittered dangerously reminding her that this was still the Batman whether he was in cape and cowl or not.

“You know what, Bruce? You’re a real son of a bitch!” She snapped at him.

“I’ve been told that before,” Bruce rumbled low in his throat. “Doesn’t matter, you’re still coming with me.”

“The hell I am!” She shot back. “You have no say in my life—none! So you can take your caveman bullshit and go straight to hell.”
He took a step closer, his face a hard mask of anger. “This is not a negotiation, remember?”

“You’ve got that right.” Felicity huffed as she folded her arms across her chest, managing not to wince as she put pressure on her hand. “I’m not afraid of you Batman so if you want to take me down then do it, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to spend the rest of my life with you treating me like some kind of—of—thing that you can bully into doing whatever you want and occasionally screw!”

“I’m trying to save your life!” He said angrily, the cold in his eyes replaced now by fire.

“Like I haven’t heard that one today!” She shot back, “I’m so sick and fucking tired of hearing that speech that I’d rather have one of the Huntress’s bolts in my neck than have to go through it again! Who in the hell do you think you are that you have the right to barge into my life and take over everything? Just go!”

“That’s not going to happen!” Bruce’s voice rose to match hers. “You’re the one who decided to play vigilante games, remember? Well this is the cost!”

“Turn me in then!” She returned. “Call the cops, I’ll even confess! Maybe they’ll put me in the cage next to the Joker and he can teach me a few dead baby jokes while I tell him my hard won theories about the intimacy issues of masked vigilantes! We’ll swap toilet wine recipes and take couples shiv carving lessons together!”

“You and I both know that’s not an option,” Bruce said, crowding into her personal space. “You’re my responsibility and I won’t allow anything to happen to you whether you like it or not!”

“I’m an adult, Bruce! I’m not a child and you aren’t my father or my husband! And even if you were you still wouldn’t have the right because I don’t belong to you!” She raged.

“Yes, you do,” he said, lowering his head until they were nearly nose to nose, his jaw clenched and a vein throbbing in his temple. “Whether either of us like it or not, you’ve always belonged to me and I won’t stand by and let you get hurt or killed just because you’re too damned stubborn to see reason!”

“It’s none of your business what I do anymore, Bruce. Or have you forgotten what happened the other day?” Her voice was cold. “I’m not some 19 year old virgin who’s too naïve to know any better. You left! You tried to sneak off like a coward then kicked me out of your life and made it very clear that you don’t give a damn about me, that I’m just a warm body you like to play cat and mouse with! Well, listen up; I’m done playing! I’ve let you have your way for far too long but that’s over now. Get out of my house, get out of my life, and if you ever show your face around me again I will rain hell down on you! Barbara may be good but we both know that I’m better and those threats you keep hurling at me cut both ways.”

“That’s an empty threat and you know it,” Bruce said in a cold but confident tenor. “You might hate me now but you’d never risk endangering the others or the mission.”

“Try me,” she shot back, her eyes hard and angry. “I am so done with you after all of this that any feelings I might have had are long gone! You can’t keep pushing everyone away and expect them not to push back, Bruce! The way I see it, if you have gotten so out of control that you’re able to justify stalking and harassing me like this after telling me twice how little I mean to you, then you’re no better than any of the men you’ve taken down. Did you hear that, Bruce? You’re no better than any of those sadistic creeps out there that you’ve spent most of your life fighting against! That’s what you’ve become! Are you happy now? Are you proud of yourself? You’ve finally become the monster that you set out to be!”

He was livid: his controlled demeanor shattered and he grabbed her arm, hauling her up against him,
“That’s not true and you know it!”

She winced and looked first at his hand then into his eyes, not having to say a word.

He released her suddenly, gazing down at her, his eyes swirling with conflicting emotions, “Felicity, I—You know I—”

“You son of a bitch!” Was all she heard and then Bruce was sailing through the air and bouncing off the far wall of her bedroom, the cracked drywall raining plaster onto the floor. He quickly got his feet under him and adopted a defensive stance as he faced his attacker.

Felicity turned to the enraged man in her bedroom in shock and surprise. His chest was heaving, his eyes blazing, and his lips were curled over his teeth in a snarl. “Oliver? What the hell are you doing here?”

“Bad back, huh?” Bruce said, flicking his eyes toward Felicity before addressing Oliver. “Arrow.”

“Batman,” Oliver countered. “You’re trespassing. Starling is my city, not yours.”

“This may be your city but Felicity is my responsibility,” he said as the Bat emerged, his voice lowering to a chilling registry.

“Not anymore, she’s not,” Oliver said with matching intensity.

“I am so not in the mood for this crap,” she snapped at both of them. “If you two want to have a pissing contest then take it outside! Better yet, take it across state lines because I’m sick of the both of you!”

Ignoring her, both men sized each other up, Bruce having a slight height and muscle advantage but with Oliver not far behind.

“Oh shit,” Diggle said from behind Felicity as he jogged up to the doorway as they watched the two men eye one another.

“Felicity, go with Diggle,” Oliver ordered.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Felicity said irritably. “Both of you need to leave my house—now!”

“Felicity, go with Diggle,” Oliver ordered.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Felicity said irritably. “Both of you need to leave my house—now!”

“She’s right,” Diggle addressed both men. “You both need to leave while Felicity and I sort out this mess. I was barely able to talk that moving guy out of calling the cops but if you keep this up someone is going to dial 911 and then what are you going to do?”

“I’m not going anywhere until Wayne and I have this out,” Oliver said, his eyes locked on the man in question.

“Agreed,” Bruce said low in his throat as the shadow of the Bat began to creep over his features.

“Well, I’m so glad the two of you can agree about something! Meanwhile how am I supposed to explain to the landlord how the holes got in the walls?” Felicity said to them as she pointed to the damaged drywall.

Bruce addressed Oliver, “Leave while you still can Queen and I won’t come after you.”

“You’d better bring it then because I will be coming after you,” Oliver shot back.

The two men came together in a clash of fists, each hit resounding loudly in the confined space.
There was a blur of punches and both men hit the bed causing the foundation to crack and break as the heavy wooden legs bit deeply into the hardwood and scraped along the floor.

“My bed!” Felicity cried out in distress.

“Step back,” Diggle ordered as he took her by the elbow and placed himself between her and the ensuing melee.

Oliver grabbed the lamp off her nightstand and brought it down hard on Bruce’s upper back causing the other man to grunt in pain before punching him in the jaw and causing the younger man to be thrown into the chaise that collapsed under his weight.

“That’s—that’s—“ she turned to Dig, her fingers pointing helplessly at the damage being done to her home. “Those were antiques! I reupholstered that chair myself!”

Diggle winced as Bruce got in a solid shot and blood from Oliver’s nose sprayed over the duvet and pillows. “Ooh! Uh, maybe your renter’s insurance will—“ Oliver rolled off the bed and grabbed a heavy silver picture frame off the other side table and smashed it against the side of Bruce’s face, “—cover it?” He said with a sympathetic cringe.

Bruce let fly with a power punch to Oliver’s midsection sending him careening into the other nightstand closest to the window causing both to shatter in a splinters of wood and glass. Oliver jumped to his feet and flung himself into Bruce causing the other man to slam into the dresser and forcing Diggle to push Felicity out into the hallway. Getting to his feet he snatched up one of the ornate drawer fronts that had become separated from the dovetailing and slammed it into Oliver’s shoulders causing the other man to grunt in pain as it cracked in two. He followed that by picking up her large antique etched glass jewelry box and threw it at him. Oliver shielded himself with his forearm causing glass and jewelry to scatter along the floor only to then be trampled underfoot as the men grappled with one another.

“Okay, we’re going to the living room,” Diggle said, half pushing, half dragging Felicity into safety.

“But—but—“ Felicity stuttered helplessly as she allowed herself to be removed from the line of fire.

“Trust me, just let them work this out,” he said just before a snow globe came flying toward them to shatter on the wall over their heads. Diggle moved Felicity into the kitchen so they could watch from a safer distance.

Bruce flew backwards out of the bedroom, crashing through the door and creating more cracks in the drywall as he slammed hard against it. Oliver stumbled after him and Bruce managed to deliver a solid kick that sent him careening through the door to the guest room before following him in with blood in his eye.

“Not my clothes! Not my clothes!” Felicity chanted as Diggle had to forcibly hold her back from rushing after them. They could hear the sounds of metal against metal and the sound of material ripping and tearing. “Not my clothes!!!”

Oliver stumbled out of the room with a metal rod in one hand, his face bloody and his clothes ripped as he wiped the blood from his eyes with the very expensive Chado Ralph Rucci dress she’d purchased just the day before. Bruce came stumbling after, one of the rods from her garment racks held aloft like a club, as he swept the scraps of lace, silk, and cotton off from where they had become entangled around him.

There was a clang of metal against metal as the men brought the fight into her living room. Oliver
was shoved over the back of the leather couch where he landed on her coffee table causing the wood and glass to splinter and shatter all around him. Bruce vaulted over the couch toward him and Oliver used the end of the bar like a lance, missing the other man and causing the pipe to rip through the leather of her sofa and lodge out the back. Before he could tear it free Bruce used his rod like a bat catching him in the middle and sending him flying into her entertainment center. Her TV crackled and sparked as Oliver jumped away from the damaged electronics and slid toward the fireplace like he was stealing third. He grabbed the seasoned logs that had been stacked neatly in the grate and began hurling them at the Dark Knight.

Diggle shielded Felicity with his own body as Bruce batted the logs aside sending them careening over their heads and into the cabinets above them. The glass and wood cabinet doors shattered and the shelves collapsed causing her plates and glassware to pour out onto the countertop, sink, and floor.

“I can’t—I can’t—” Felicity stuttered wild eyed as she looked around her. She abruptly turned on her heel and headed toward her bedroom.

“Where are you—Felicity?” Dig winced as he kept one eye trained on the fight, trailing behind her.

When she got into the room she eyed the destruction all around her, a small sob escaping. Not one single stick of furniture had been spared. Not that she’d had a lot, but every piece had been bought and selected by her and most she’d refinshed herself before the mission took over her life. Her mind wandered back to the weekends spent at estate sales and antique marts, seminars on faux painting, refinishing, and decoupage at the local hardware store, hours spent on YouTube videos learning how to upholster and walking through fabric shops looking for just the right material to cover the chaise, not to mention the time she’d spent sanding and repairing each and every piece and ordering replacement hardware from reproduction specialists; all gone.

She took a moment to brace herself then stepped over the broken drawers and shattered memories into her walk-in closet to grab her suitcases. “Here!” She said, tossing one large case then another toward Diggle before reaching for a few smaller ones and hauling them out. “Start packing. Anything you can grab just shove in there,” she told him as she began grabbing shoes and stuffing as many of them as she could in a duffle bag. “Oh, and don’t forget my guns! My Glock is still in my purse from the last time we went to the range but the lockboxes and my shotgun are under the bed.”

“Since when do you keep a shotgun under your bed?” Diggle asked, doing a double take but the second he sees her expression, he nods. “Yeah, okay. Got it,” he said walking over to the bed and hauling the three small cases out from under the sagging mattress. He opened them all up to check them before looking back under the bed. “I found your guns and extra ammo but where’s the shotgun?”

“Hidden in between the frame and the mattress in a little cubby—you know what; just skip it,” she said, waving him off. “They can just pack that with my stuff. I’ll just take the Glock and the P99 If you don’t mind, hold on to the .38 I keep in the Lair for me, okay? You can send it on with the rest of my things later.”

“No problem,” he said, tucking the box for her revolver back under the bed and handing her the Walther case and the empty one for her Glock along with several boxes of shells. “You know, they’re lucky one of them didn’t get shot in the ass when they busted your bed. If I had known this is where you were storing your side arms, either Lance or I would have taken you to the sporting goods store for a gun safe.”

“I meant to get one but then I figured if I needed my weapon in the middle of the night…”
“True,” he shrugged as she accepted the cases and stuck them both in the nearest large suitcase, making a note to remove the other gun from her purse before the TSA did. “Can you get what’s in the dresser next?”

“Sure,” Diggle reached for one of the drawers and jumped back as the drawer handle separated from it causing it to slide out and fall to the floor with a bang. “Um,” he said helpfully as he eyed the colorful array of panties and bras spilling over his feet.

“Just start shoving,” she told him again doing her best not to look as she went into her bathroom with a cosmetics case and continued to shout out orders from the other room. “Panties, bras, socks, pajamas,” She stunk her head out of the doorway and tossed him her bathrobe. “This, too. Oh, and plenty of jeans and tee-shirts! They’re in the two bottom drawers.” As she slipped back into the en suite she called out, “How did you guys get here so fast anyway?” She peeked back out with a frown, “I mean I called but Bruce snatched the phone out of my hand and hung it up.”

“No quite,” Diggle said as he started shoving clothes into the bags quickly deciding that speed was more important than neatness. “The line was open so we heard everything. We were in the car headed over here anyway but when he heard you call Wayne ‘Batman’, well, let’s just say traffic laws were broken.”

“Wait, you were headed over here before I called?” Felicity asked as she emerged from the bathroom. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” he said with a snort. “Hell, I’ve given up on trying to figure out whatever this shit is that’s going on between you two. I mean—Hey!” He looked up from what he was doing when he saw her making her way to the door leading out into the hallway with several garment bags draped over one arm while she dragged the shoes and cosmetics cases behind her with the other. “Where are you going?”

“To see if I can salvage any of my other clothes,” she said over the cacophony of grunts, groans, slaps, and crashes that were still echoing within the small space.

“Wait!” He said, dumping an entire drawer into the last case and tossing it out of the way before quickly zipping it up and snatching up both bags to follow her.

Felicity stared at the chaos of her once orderly wardrobe room and it was all she could do not to burst into tears. Taking another deep breath she dropped the garment bags on the floor and waded in.

Diggle peeked inside and looked around, his eyes wide, “Whoa.”

“I’m not even going to bother wading through this stuff,” she said as she tossed him anything that was still hanging off the ground or at least still in its own garment bag. “Put as many sweaters and stuff as you can in the garment bags by your feet and the rest will just have to stay here.”

She gathered up as much as she could as Diggle quickly stuffed the sweaters and the odd dress inside the zippered bags then she began hauling her things out the door and into the hallway.

Another crash from the living room stopped Diggle in his tracks and he took Felicity by the arm, “Uh, why don’t we go back into the bedroom until the coast is clear.”

“Forget it,” Felicity said, steely determination written all over her face. “I’m done and I refuse to watch as they destroy everything I own.”

As she approached the living room she was forced to drop her bags and cover her eyes as one of her laptops bounced off the wall six inches from her face. She took a moment to center herself before
picking up the bags and continuing on. “They just had to use my laptop,” she grumbled as she
snatched her purse that was, incredibly enough, still on the console table which was, as of yet, intact.
She had very little faith that it would remain so for long however as both men seemed determined to
thoroughly demolish the entire neighborhood starting with her once cozy bungalow. She’d caught
glimpses of the chaos despite herself and she was pretty sure the owner was going to sue her for
damages.

She and Diggle made it as far as the front porch when the nervous man with the clipboard stepped
out, his eyes huge as he heard the noises coming from inside.

“Um, is everything alright? Should I call the police now?” Just as he asked the small spindly legged
console table and one of her barstools flew out of the doorway and smashed on the stone walkway.
Although they were several feet away he held his clipboard in front of his face as a shield.

“No,” Felicity said in a resigned voice as she set down her bags. “They’ll work it out eventually.”
She turned to him, “You might have to tell your men to wait another forty-five minutes or so and, if
they still aren’t done by then, leave Mr. Wayne a text and he’ll have to reschedule.”

“Um, but I still have his card,” he said holding out a shiny black credit card with the bust of a
Centurion stamped in silver across the front.

“I’ll take that,” Felicity said, snatching it from his fingers and dropping it in her purse. “Is there
anything that I need to sign before I leave?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he handed her the clipboard and the pen. “I just need you to, uh, sign and verify the
work order and delivery address.”

She looked at the paperwork with an arched eyebrow as both Diggle and the foreman swiveled their
heads toward yet another loud crashing sound. “This isn’t right; my things should be going to the
Wayne Towers penthouse suite on the Upper West Side not The Wayne Foundation Building on the
East End.”

“Um, Mr. Wayne gave us that address.”

Felicity thought about it a moment before smiling ruefully, “Oh, I just bet he did.” She scribbled out
the address on the paperwork and wrote in her father’s address instead. “Please see to it that it’s
delivered to the correct address. Also, some of the furnishings and such may have been damaged.”
At that moment a numbered print she had bought at a charity auction flew out of the door way to join
the remains of the console table. “Please make a note of any and all damaged furnishings then have
your men haul it off. Also try to,” she winced as a loud cracking sound and a flurry of curses reached
them, “salvage as many of my clothes and things as you can. Anything torn beyond repair you can
trash and anything that is dirty or just has minor tears pack them up and take them to Kurtzberg’s Dry
Cleaners on the corner of Weisinger and Papp Street next to Goldstein’s Pharmacy. Tell them it’s a
donation from Felicity Smoak. The couple there run a shelter and charity thrift shop in the Glades.”

“Um, are you—“ he winced as a loud grunt of pain echoed down toward them, “sure?”

She nodded, “Just…try to save what you can.” Another loud crash and a puff of dry wall dust blew
out the door. “If there’s anything you can save. Thanks.” She picked up the bags again and paused,
“Oh, when do you think they’ll arrive?”

“Mr. Wayne said to deliver your furnishings and things to the airport and Wayne Shipping would
handle it from there. Depending on how long it takes us to get in there,” another crash and another
pained look on his face, “A day? Maybe two?” He looked at her helplessly, “Listen, someone could
really get hurt in there, we should really--!"

“It’s okay,” Dig said, cutting him off with a confident and laid back smile. “They’re old friends; you
know how it is with guys. They’re just letting off some steam.”

“Letting off steam?” The guy said dubiously. They all stopped and looked as a kitchen knife flew out
of the open door and lodged deeply into one of the posts on the porch.

Felicity sighed and opened her purse pulling out her wallet. “Great,” she said, looking at the forty
bucks she had stashed in there. “Hang on for a second.” She put down the bags and headed back inside.

“Wait,” Dig said, catching her arm. “Don’t go in there.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, taking a breath and stomping back into the once charming little house that was
now a warzone.

She peered inside and winced. They had taken out the entire bar and one of her barstools was
hanging from the ceiling fan and the other was lodged in a broken window. She looked toward the
living room to see that Bruce had Oliver in a headlock then winced in sympathy as Oliver grabbed
the other man’s nuts and twisted causing Bruce to cry out and send an elbow onto his back in
response.

She grabbed Bruce’s coat off the shattered remains of the bar and dug into his pockets until she
found his billfold. Opening it up she pulled out a large wad of bills and tossed the wallet on the floor
before walking back out again. She didn’t bother counting; she just peeled off some of the bills and
walked up to the man, shoving it at him. “Here.”

“Um,” the man looked at the hundred dollar bills dumbly.

“Take it,” she ordered. “That should buy them a couple of hours of playtime.”

“I don’t know…” he said slowly, looking at her in confusion.

She peeled off a few more bills and added it to the pile. “No cops,” she told him.

“Okay,” he said, taking the cash. “But what if—“

“If they get hurt then it’s on them,” she told him as she shoved the rest of the bills into her pocket.
“Are we done here?” She asked. He nodded in response staring at the money in his hand. “Great,
and thank you,” Felicity said, picking up her bags and walking down the steps with Diggle beside
her. “And make sure to charge Mr. Wayne for any clean-up costs or overtime.” She said with a smile
as she walked to her car, the moving supervisor still gaping at her in shock, several one hundred
dollar bills clutched in his hand.

“Where’d you get the wad?” Diggle asked in amusement. “You must have handed that guy at least a
thousand dollars.”

“Stole it from Bruce’s wallet,” she told him before putting down the bags so she could reach into her
pocket and pulled out the rest of the cash. She peeled off roughly half of the remaining bills for
herself and handed the rest to Dig, “Here.”

“What’s this for?” He asked, taking the cash.

“Just in case you have to bribe the guy again,” she told him. “The rest I’m keeping for cab fare and
aggravation.”

“Speaking of mugging Bruce Wayne,” Diggle glanced at her, “Was that an AmEx Black card you put in your purse?”

“Yup,” Felicity said as she unlocked her trunk. “Although, technically, it’s called a Centurion Card.”

“I always thought those things were an urban myth,” he said rocking back on his heels.

“Nope,” She said taking a minute to lean her hip against the car.

“So…what are you planning on doing with Batman’s unlimited credit card?” He asked with a slight upward twitch of the corners of his mouth.

“It’s not Batman’s card,” she corrected him.

“Bruce Wayne’s card then, sorry.”

“Not his either,” Felicity said with a wicked gleam in her eye. “The way I see it possession is 9/10 of the law and, what do you know, it’s in my possession. Hey Dig, how about I buy you an island if you help me get my bags in the car.”

“Damn girl,” he chuckled as he lifted the largest of the suitcases and maneuvered it into her tiny trunk, “I always knew you were something special but you are stone-cold fearless.” When the trunk was full he opened her car door and wedged the rest of them into her backseat, “So…where to now?”

“First I need to talk to my landlord down the street and then I would really appreciate it if you could follow me as I drop off my car,” she asked. “I’m going to need a ride to the airport after that but I’ll understand if you can’t do it.”

Diggle looked torn for a minute, “I really should get back in there and see how Oliver is doing…”

She smiled weakly and shrugged, “That’s okay, I understand. I can call a cab from the dealership.”

He glanced once more towards the tiny bungalow where the moving supervisor was staring inside the doorway with a worried expression on his face and sighed. “Fuck it,” Diggle said gruffly. “Their dumb asses can figure it out on their own. Do you already have a ticket and everything?”

“No—“ she shut her eyes in frustration, “Goddamn it, my phone!”

“Don’t sweat it,” he said, reaching into his jacket. “Take mine and I’ll ship yours to you if it survives the vigilante tornado.”

“Thanks but that’s okay,” she said with a wicked gleam in her eye. “I’ll just let Bruce buy me another phone later but first he’s buying me a plane ticket and then a whole new wardrobe when I land in Gotham. Sure you don’t want to come with?” She asked, reaching into her purse and flashing the black coated titanium card. “First class all the way.”

“Tempting, but I get the feeling that pissing off a guy like Bruce Wayne would be a bad idea. I’m not quite as pretty as you are so I doubt he’d be in a forgiving mood if I started jet-setting on his dime.” He grinned and nodded toward her Cooper. “You take care of your business and I’ll meet you at the BMW dealership. It’s the one on Lemire, right?”

“Right, thanks,” she smiled at him before getting in to drive over to Mr. Kreisberg’s house which
was just down the road near the gate. She quickly explained that Mr. Wayne was doing a bit of remodeling that may have gotten somewhat messy. She told him that she was late for her flight and gave him Bruce’s credit card information to pay for any and all damages. She then gave him the correct address (and not the address to his penthouse in the Wayne Foundation Building) so that he could forward her mail.

A little less than an hour later she had a non-stop First Class ticket in her hand, courtesy of Bruce, and was saying goodbye to Diggle. She hugged and kissed him, promised to call him when she could, then handed him a card. “Look, I know Oliver isn’t going to want to use any resources affiliated with um, you know who,” she said mindful of the fact they were standing in the middle of a crowded airport, “but if I’m not going to be there then you need someone helping you.”

“What’s this?” He asked looking at a long string of letters and numbers printed on the card.

“Oracle, she’s a friend of mine. She’s my counterpart, you could say; she does for him what I do for you guys.” Felicity explained in a low tone. “If you need eyes you enter this passkey into the file labeled ‘Watchtower’ on the LAIR workstation. It will connect you to her. I’ll give her the heads up so she’ll know to expect you.”

“I don’t know about this, Felicity,” Dig said slowly. “Besides, she’s in Gotham, how can she possibly help us from 3000 miles away?”

Felicity took him by the arm and lead him to an area that offered a little more privacy. “I’m going to tell you a secret because, well, since the cat’s out of the bag it doesn’t matter anyway.” She took a deep breath, “The project I helped Bruce with, the one I consulted on—did Oliver tell you about it?”

“He mentioned something before everything hit the fan, yeah. He said something about how you developed some software for Wayne. I’m guessing it was for his other business though, right?” He looked at her curiously.

“I wrote an AI operating system known as ‘Watchtower’ for him. Because I developed both systems using the same base code, LAIR and Watchtower are compatible. With this key code,” she tapped the card Diggle was still holding in emphasis, “Oracle can tap into every system linked to LAIR which means she can hack every traffic cam, every police file, and every security and ATM cam that I was able to. It will be as though I’m sitting at my desk, same as always, chatting away in your ear only it will be Oracle instead.”

“Do you trust her?” Dig asked seriously.

She nodded, “With my life and you can as well, I promise.” She glanced up as the announcement for her flight echoed around them, “I’ll call you or you can call me when I get another phone. Don’t forget, Gotham is three hours ahead of us so just keep that in mind, okay? No disturbing my beauty sleep.”

“Got it, and here,” he said, handing her a small baggie of what looked like tea packets.

“They have tea in Gotham, but thanks,” Felicity said, taking the baggie from him with a frown.

“Not this brand,” he said. “Before we headed for your place I grabbed some of Oliver’s herbs from my emergency kit. He mentioned the bruises, so…”

“Thanks,” she said, touched. “They aren’t that bad but this will definitely help.” She looked at the tiny sachets one more time before slipping them into her purse. “It was pretty smart of you to disguise them as tea bags.”
“Well, it’s better than leaving them loose in a baggie then having to convince TSA that it isn’t dope and running the risk of a government issued enema.”

“True. Thanks John, I’ll call you soon. I promise.” They hugged and said their goodbyes then Felicity turned away from him and toward an uncertain future alone.
Chapter Eighteen

Bruce sat back on his haunches prepared to spring back into action. His ribs were on fire, his balls ached, and he was actually getting tired; a testament to the skill of his opponent. From across the room he watched as Queen wiped some blood out of his eyes, his own breathing rapid and pained although he looked more than willing to get back into the scrap if Bruce made so much as a move. Despite himself he had to give the man his due. Queen was no amateur, he could really fight. He’d
also had League training; that much was clear from the fact that he was still holding his own.

“Ra’s taught you well or was it one of his minions who trained you on the island?” He heard himself ask.

Oliver squinted through a haze of blood and the ringing in his ears from one punch too many, “Ra’s?”

“Ra’s al Ghul. Don’t bother pretending, Queen. I know you trained with the League. The only question is if it was the League of Assassins or the League of Shadows because I know Lian Yu was a training ground for the Assassins but you fight using Shadow techniques.”

“I was on Lian Yu and I’m familiar with the League of Assassins and Ra’s al Ghul but I wasn’t trained by them nor was I ever a member unless you call spending five years dodging those bastards and their bullets training! I’ve been investigating links he has to Starling but he’s no friend of mine.” Oliver eyed him warily, “What’s your connection to the League?”

“What’s yours?” He shot back. “If all you were doing was dodging bullets then why did Nyssa bring her entire honor guard down here to help you with the Blood Army a couple of years back?”

Oliver’s jaw clenched and his fists balled at his sides again, “Someone I know was formerly associated with the League and called them in; I had no hand in it but I wasn’t about to turn down their help even if it meant leaping from the frying pan into the fire later.” He shot him a narrow look, “Speaking of which, if you’re so invested in Felicity’s safety then where the hell were you two years ago?”

Bruce ignored his question. “And Felicity never spoke to you about Ra’s al Ghul even though she knew about your time on the island?”

Oliver snorted humorlessly, sitting back a bit and seeming to relax his guard even though Bruce knew better. “There’s a lot of things Felicity hasn’t told me but, to be fair, I don’t talk about the island much.” His eyes took on a haunted quality, “It’s not exactly something I like to revisit.” His eyes met Bruce’s, “Who’s Ra’s al Ghul to you?”

“If you’re telling the truth then it shouldn’t really matter to you, should it?” Bruce shot back.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Oliver said in the same tone, “but I’ve got a mission of my own here in Starling that’s still somehow connected to what went down on that island and, like I said, Ra’s is a part of that. His name first came up in connection to Merlyn and the Glades disaster and keeps coming up time and time again. The fact that you’re so interested in this guy tells me that I should be as well and it would be nice to have some real answers for once.”

At that moment the movers began to walk back in led by the foreman who was still clutching his clipboard as they goggled at the mess the two men had made.

“Holy…” the clipboard guy said as he slipped on some of the rubble and had to rebalance himself. “Uh, Mr. Wayne, do you require,” he flinched as the one remaining unbroken cup in the cabinet gave it up and committed suicide by sink, “assistance?”

“No, we’re good,” Bruce sighed, getting up from the floor and stretching his muscles. “Don’t worry about finishing today but I’ll still pay you for your time. Come back tomorrow with a bigger crew and pack up what you can,” he surveyed the wreckage around him dubiously, “if anything’s left, and make a note of what was damaged and send me a list. I’ll call down to Wayne Shipping and have them send in a maintenance crew to clean up the worst of it and start on repairs to the walls and
floors.” He looked around again and muttered under his breath, “Although it might be easier just to buy the damn place.”

“Yes sir, um, Ms. Smoak already told us that’s what you’d want to do.”

Bruce nodded, “She was right, she usually is.” He looked up at him as he rubbed his hand across the back of his neck, “Just put it all on my card. You still have it, right?”

“Um, no sir,” the foreman swallowed nervously. “Ms. Smoak…took it.”

Oliver snickered then got up to cross the room and dig around inside the freezer. He pulled out a bag of frozen peas for himself and tossed Bruce some corn as he pressed the plastic bag to the back of his neck, “You’re screwed now, Wayne. I know for a fact that Felicity knows how to spend a couple of million bucks when she’s feeling motivated.”

“That’s fine,” Bruce said with a pained look as he pressed the bag of corn to the goose-egg coming up on his temple. “You can go now,” he dismissed them and they filed out. “I guess I should talk to the landlord; convince him to settle now before someone decides to sue.” He looked around with a squint as his eye was quickly beginning to swell, “This shit is easier when you’re suited up; no one ever asks how you intend to fix everything before you leave the scene.”

“True,” Oliver said as he pulled out his cell and began dialing.

“Calling Felicity?” Bruce asked wearily as he reached down to pick up his billfold. He opened it and frowned, “I had a little over three thousand dollars in there.” He made an annoyed sound, “She left the rest of my cards but she took all the cash. She’s definitely pissed.”

“Yes, and I’ve got a feeling she’s not going to be all that happy with me either. Luckily I left my wallet in my back pocket,” he grinned then stopped. He reached into the back of his trousers and nodded. “Good,” Oliver said in relief as he pressed the phone to his ear. Both men looked up as the ringtone Felicity used for Oliver’s phone (Holding Out For A Hero by Bonnie Tyler) sounded from the bedroom. “I thought Dig took her out of here.”

They both headed back to the bedroom, working their way through the mess as they went. Oliver caught a glimpse of Felicity’s guestroom and shook his head, “Great, there goes my credit rating,” he winced before walking through the shattered remains of her bedroom door to find the source of the ring tone.

Bruce looked in the room as he came up behind him and his jaw tightened. “Yeah, well, I don’t know what she’s planning on doing to you but I have a sinking feeling that she’s going to be testing to see if my AmEx Black really does have an unlimited credit limit.”

Oliver grabbed her phone from on top of the dresser and tossed it to him. “She left it. It’s not really like her but I can see how it would get lost in the confusion.”

“That, or she didn’t want us tracking her,” Bruce said with an aggrieved tone as he looked around the room.

Oliver nodded and started dialing again, “I’ll call Dig and make sure she’s okay. She’s probably with him at Big Belly Burger or Mr. Chow’s eating her way through half the menu.”

Bruce arched his eyebrow and nodded as he reached for the white sack that had been sitting next to the phone on the dresser. “She does like to eat when she’s stressed.”

“Or pissed off, whatever the case may be. Hey Dig? Everything okay?” Oliver asked as he moved
Bruce opened the sack and looked inside with a frown then pulled out the objects inside curiously. First the box of large sized condoms, a small bottle of Astroglide, and—he paused.

“What’s that?” Oliver asked looking up curiously then swore under his breath, “Um Dig, I’ll call you back.” He walked over to Bruce and looked down at the colorful box of emergency contraception as he rubbed his hand over his mouth. “Shit.”

Bruce closed his eyes as he cursed his own irresponsible behavior before something occurred to him. “What’s it got to do with you?”

Oliver scratched his beard ruefully, “Damn it, I wasn’t thinking and I should have. She told me that the last guy she’d been with was—” he glanced up at Bruce. “Well, anyway, I just assumed she was on the pill. I didn’t take into consideration that it’d been over four years for her.”

“When exactly did this happen?” Bruce asked in a dangerously low tone.

“Last night,” Oliver said, his own eyes narrowing. “Why, what’s it matter to you? She said you broke it off with her years ago.”

Bruce rubbed his hand across his forehead and moved to sit down on the corner of the mattress that was still being supported by the broken frame. He sat his elbows on his knees and hung his head, shaking it ruefully. “The first time, yeah.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Oliver asked, a bit of the Arrow creeping into his tone. “When was the second time?”

“Saturday,” he said without looking at him.

“Wait,” Oliver frowned as though doing the math in his head, “But that means…” He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, “Now a lot of what she was trying to tell me is suddenly starting to make sense.” He looked over at Bruce appraisingly, “What now?”

Bruce picked up a small piece of glass off the ruined duvet and tossed it aside ruefully, “I don’t know.” He looked up at him, “Are you and she…together?”

Oliver leaned against the dresser and crossed his arms over his chest. “No, and I doubt she’ll ever want me back after the way I left things with her, not to mention the whole ‘destroying everything she owns’ thing. You?”

“I don’t know but I’d venture a guess that since she threatened to rain hell down on my head if I ever so much as looked at her again I’d say probably not,” he sighed and gestured toward the other objects on the dresser. “Given her other purchases I’m thinking she intends to stay here with you no matter how I feel about it.”

“She’s not,” Oliver said quietly and at his curious look he gestured with his cell. “Dig just told me. He took her to turn in her car at the dealership and then dropped her off at the airport. She’s on her way to Gotham.”

“Why would she still be going to Gotham if the two of you…?” He mused curiously.

“That would be me again,” Oliver said reluctantly. “You might be a world class asshole but you were right about one thing; I can’t keep her safe. Not anymore.”
Bruce looked up, his gaze sharp as the Batman began to creep back into his posture, “What do you mean?”

Oliver looked around the ruined flat and got to his feet. “Tell you what, let’s get out of here and take this conversation to my place.”

“Your office?”

“Not quite.”

“You call your HQ the Lair?”

“Felicity does,” Diggle told him. “She just started saying ‘the Lair’, as in, ‘I have to run it through the Lair workstation,’ and it just stuck.”

Oliver shook his head, “I know, sounds like a cheesy Bond villain hang-out. I kept telling her to stop but…”

“Lair or LAIR?” Bruce asked, looking at the servers and monitors at Felicity’s workstation.

“Is there a difference?” Diggle said in confusion.

“Possibly,” Bruce said noncommittally as he looked around the Arrow’s Lair in the Foundry carefully from his seat near the workstation. The design and layout felt…familiar. “Felicity designed this space along with your system, didn’t she?”

“Yeah,” Oliver said then smiled ruefully, “Let me guess; same as yours right?”

He shook his head, “Not quite. Mine’s bigger and has more bats and stalactites but the basic use of the space is similar only much more efficient. It’s very…” He tried to think of the right word but he could only come up with one, “Felicity.”

“Wait, did you say bats and stalactites; as in a Batcave?” Diggle grinned from his place at the arm of the large leather couch at Oliver who, in turn, shook his head as he made an aggravated sound deep in his throat.

“What?” Bruce asked, noticing their exchange.

“Just more Felicity-sized pieces falling into place,” Oliver said, running a hand through his short hair. “Felicity sometimes refers to the Lair as the ‘Arrow Cave’. We never got the joke until now.”

“I always assumed she meant it like ‘Man Cave’, but I guess not…” Diggle chuckled.

“So how did this happen?” Bruce asked, despite himself. “What Felicity said to me that night on the roof; she recruited you or vice versa?”

“Both,” Diggle answered before Oliver could.

“What does that mean?” He asked, steadily watching them for any sign of deception.

“You could say I sort-of recruited her,” Oliver said clearing his throat. “But after the Glades fell I gave up on the Arrow and she rebuilt the Lair then came after me.”

“You said you didn’t know of her connection to me and yet you recruited her for your mission?”
Bruce asked, still not sure if he could fully trust the other man. “That’s a bit of a coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Again, the pieces are slowly falling into place the more we learn about our girl.” Bruce wasn’t sure he liked the idea of Queen referring to her as ‘their girl’ but allowed him to continue. “After I got back from the island and began my mission, Diggle and I needed help retrieving some information from a laptop that had been shot up. I went to Walter Steele to ask if he knew someone I could show my laptop to that was trustworthy and discreet so he sent me to Felicity.” Oliver leaned back into the cushions of the plush leather couch that was nearly identical to the one they’d destroyed in her house. “At the time I didn’t question it, Walter’s word was enough, but now that I understand a bit more of Felicity’s past and Walter’s connection to her family I know why he sent me to her.”

Bruce frowned, something still didn’t make sense. “So you took a bullet-ridden laptop to a perfect stranger and you never questioned the fact that she didn’t even blink?”

“Worse than that,” Diggle snorted. “When she asked what happened he told her he spilled a latte on it.”

“And when she pointed out the bullet holes I told her the coffee shop was in a bad part of town,” Oliver said as he scratched his beard, color rising on his cheeks. “I was going for funny and charming but I don’t think she bought it.”

“And then you, what, recruited her just like that?” He asked, still frowning.

Oliver shifted uncomfortably, “No, uh…there was some other stuff.”

“Sports drinks in syringes, security key fobs and scavenger hunts; he was weaving so much bullshit his eyes were turning brown!” Diggle was snickering beside him on the couch, his grin splitting his face in two. “Every time he’d spout that shit she’d give him a look and I’d be sweating balls and thinking this motherfucker is going to get me thrown in jail! Oh man, you have no idea how good it feels to be able to tell this stuff to someone besides Felicity. The things I’ve had to put up with…”

Oliver cleared his throat and shot the bodyguard a dirty look, “Well, as I was saying, a few other things happened and we’d go to Felicity for tech support. She never questioned it, so it became a kind of game between us. A few times she’d balk or have questions but then she’d drop it and we’d be good again. Then she came to me one day with a book she’d been given by Walter and asked me for help.” He paused, “Well, she asked me to ask the Arrow for help to be precise. He’d been kidnapped and she’d been working on a private research project for him, something Walter warned her could be dangerous. I knew she suspected I was the Arrow, probably since day one, but she was still pretending and I was willing to go with it in order for her to have some room for plausible deniability.”

He shifted a bit in his chair before continuing, “I recognized the book she gave me. My father had given me a copy of it before he—” Oliver’s face darkened at the memory, “before he died. He’d told me that it was a book of sins he’d committed and asked me to right his wrongs. When I wondered how it made its way into Walter’s possession she told me that it was my mother’s. One night while I was investigating the book I confronted my mother in my Arrow gear and she shot me. It was my fault,” he said, looking up at Bruce. “Her husband had been kidnapped, her other husband murdered, and there had already been a kidnapping attempt against me. Also I had been making my way through the list and a few of my targets had lost their lives in the process and she didn’t know who I was under the hood. It was self-defense but I was still hurt pretty bad. I had no way of getting to Diggle or the Lair and I crawled into the back seat of Felicity’s car. She saved me by bringing me to the Lair and helping Diggle patch me up. Afterwards she agreed to help us until Walter was found but she wound up staying.”
Diggle, who had been nodding as he was talking, spoke up, “Back then we were so on mission, so focused, we never questioned it. She fit into the team so well I guess we didn’t want to. I should have caught on since I was Special Forces but she acted so much like a trained operator that it was like I was back in country and she was just another CIA handler or field support.”

“She has a tendency to get under your skin like that,” Oliver murmured under his breath and Bruce, despite himself, had to agree with the sentiment.

“So she wasn’t quite lying when she said she was at the center of your team,” Bruce said, as he thought back to their discussion on the roof. “I’m guessing you and Mr. Diggle both share the Arrow identity but are there others or was that an obfuscation on her part?”

“It’s just me and Diggle although we do have others on our team.” His eyes flickered towards Bruce. “Have you ever heard of a serum known as ‘Mirakuru’?”

“Can’t say I’m familiar.”

Oliver leaned back on the couch again, “On the island there was a stash of a super soldier serum known as ‘Mirakuru’. It’s Japanese meaning—“

“The Miracle,” Bruce supplied.

Oliver nodded, “My sister’s ex-boyfriend, Roy Harper, was exposed. He was a former street gang member the Arrow recruited as an informant. After things got dangerous I tried to wave him off because I didn’t want him in the line of fire but the kid is like a pit bull; once he latches on you can’t shake him off. After he was exposed he started exhibiting abilities like enhanced strength and rapid healing. We’ve been watching him since then, trying to decide if the Mirakuru only affected him physically or if there were other side effects.” He sighed and planted his elbows on his knees. “Other people who have used the Mirakuru have gone insane but, after some initial problems, he seems to be tolerating it well. Our only concern now is the fact that he’s still a stupid kid with a temper and the power to really hurt someone if he doesn’t watch it. We had a falling out a while back and he took off for almost a year to work through it on his own but it was more than he could handle by himself. About six months ago he came back so we could try training him again but...” Oliver’s face tightened and he grimaced, a dark look passing over his face.

“He, uh, got hurt pretty bad on a mission and he’s only just started training again,” Diggle finished grimly. “The kid’s strong but he’s a real pain in the ass who still thinks he knows something even though he’s still just a punk. He’s hardheaded, undisciplined, unfocused, lacks impulse control; Oliver and I have been trying to knock some sense into him but it’s kind of tough finding enough hours in the day.”

“We’re managing,” Oliver said, although the strain was still there in his voice. “This time he’s determined to stick it out so we can make sure he stays stable. If we can get him to control his anger and redirect it, then we can control the emotional instability caused by the Mirakuru.”

“Not a bad plan,” Bruce conceded. “And this Quentin Lance with the SCPD? He’s aware of your connection to the Arrow?”

“Yes,” Diggle said, eyeing Oliver. “For a while now.”

“How long is a while?”

Both men answered at the same time but gave two very different answers.

“Six months,” Oliver answered.
“At least a year; probably two,” Dig responded.

“Which is it; six months or two years?” Bruce asked as he watched both men’s expressions carefully.

“He knows now for sure but he’s not admitting to knowing it until we officially read him in six months ago so we’re not pushing it,” Oliver said leading Bruce to believe this was a matter frequently debated between the two. “Now he’s fully in the team although we still try to keep him in the periphery as much as we can since he’s already taken a few hits professionally because of his association with the Arrow. Still, he comes to the Foundry regularly and he knows all of us. Before six months ago he would just talk around the issue of who we were and keep it all indirect so that he wouldn’t have to commit perjury if worse came to worst, but he’s known about Felicity for years and he’s been sympathetic to our cause almost since the beginning although we had a bit of a rocky start. In the beginning, he and Felicity developed a kind of shorthand with each other where they’d refer to the Arrow as ‘our mutual friend’ just in case the line wasn’t secure.” He sighed, “He’s not a big fan of mine but he loves Felicity like she’s his own kid; they’ve developed a weird kind of bond over the last three years, in the last six months especially. He’d never do anything to jeopardize her. The man nearly lost his job and his freedom and still refused to give her up.”

Something about what he just said caught his attention, “What happened six months ago?” Queen’s expression froze and Bruce narrowed his gaze, “You said that their relationship has gotten closer especially in the last six months; why is that?”

“She saved his life,” the other man said shortly but refused to elaborate.

Diggle interceded before he could question him further, “Look, all you need to know is that if Lance thinks there’s even the possibility of Felicity getting arrested for this then he’d be taking her underground himself. We trust him and can guarantee you that she’s safe with him.”

“And yet you told me earlier that Felicity was no longer safe here; why?”

“We’ve been exposed,” Oliver told him, a hint of aggravation coloring his tone. “Isabel Rochev tried to recruit Felicity to join some kind of private vigilante army Stellmoor is putting together and she knew things about our mission she shouldn’t have including my role in it and that Felicity was our tech.”

“Who else knows about your identity other than the people you’ve already mentioned?”

“Too many,” Dig muttered.

“Not many,” Oliver said, his mouth tightening. “We have an association with another vigilante called ‘The Flash’ in Central City but we don’t cross paths often. Helena Bertinelli knows as does Black Canary but if Helena was going to expose me she would have done so before now.”

“What about this ‘Black Canary’?” Bruce asked. “She’s popped up on my radar but only on the periphery.”

“It’s possible that she’s the one who exposed us,” Oliver said in a low tone, his eyes hooded and dark. “However, that said, she’s still an asset until proven otherwise. She’s the one who mentioned the name ‘Ra’s al Ghul’ to me and she was not looking forward to running into him if he showed up. She was a member of the League but cut ties with them a while back and said there was reason to believe that Ra’s al Ghul would be interested in Merlyn and the Glades attempt. Felicity said Isabel talked about her specifically and said she was currently being bankrolled by Stellmoor but I can’t confirm or deny that.”
“Then there’s the ARGUS connection,” Diggle said slowly.

“ARGUS?” Bruce said sharply.

Diggle glanced at him, “You know them?”

“Amanda Waller and I are acquainted,” Bruce said grimly.

“Amanda does get around,” Oliver said dryly.

“I take it Waller and you have a personal history?” Bruce asked.

“We have history,” Oliver told him. “I wouldn’t go so far as to label it ‘personal’ but it’s close enough.”

“She’s a warm and sunny sweetheart, isn’t she?” Diggle said dryly.

“Felicity mentioned that there may be some crossover with ARGUS and Stellmoor. Waller first tried to recruit Diggle three years ago when his ex-wife who was one of their overt field agents got into some trouble during an assignment. She was tracking someone and got caught and thrown into a Russian gulag,” Oliver told him. “We managed to break her out with the help of some old friends.”

“Bratva friends?” Bruce asked casually.

“You’re aware of my connection to Bratva,” it wasn’t a question.

“I take a keen interest in organized crime and the Russian mob has been trying to make inroads into Gotham for a while now,” Bruce told them. “Believe me when I say that finding out you were a captain in good standing with the Bratva did not reassure me of Felicity’s safety.”

“Yes, well, sometimes the job requires that we dance with the devil,” Oliver said unapologetically. “Keeping a good name with the right people has saved more lives than I can count.”

“I’ve been known to do a bit of dancing on occasion myself,” Bruce conceded. “Continue your story.”

Oliver’s jaw tightened slightly at the imperious way Bruce was directing the conversation, or rather interrogation, but still he pushed on. “It was supposed to be just Dig, Felicity, and me on the plane but Isabel showed up at the last second and forced her way on the flight.”

“She never said jack about Lyla being on the return trip either,” Diggle said as he turned to Oliver. “I always figured you smoothed that out with her.”

Oliver shook his head, “She was so focused on torturing Felicity she never looked twice at her.”

“She did what to Felicity?” Bruce asked sharply.

“Not literally,” Diggle snorted. “She’s a stone cold bitch and she likes to take it out on Felicity.” He suddenly smiled, “Until recently that is.”

“What changed?” Bruce asked, watching the byplay between the men. Oliver looked almost chagrinned and Diggle looked almost giddy with amusement.

“She and Felicity…” Oliver’s voice trailed off as he ran a hand over his mouth.

“She laid the bitch out cold, that’s what,” Diggle laughed.
“Felicity physically attacked her?” Bruce asked, his eyebrows shooting up in undisguised shock.

“Isabel is…” Oliver cleared his throat, “somewhat territorial and baiting Felicity was a form of entertainment for her. She made some remarks that went too far and Felicity punched her.”

“A one/two combo punch just like I taught her,” Diggle grinned. “I still want a copy of the footage.”

“It’s still not funny, Dig,” Oliver said wearily.

“No, it’s not, but it’s about damn time someone put an end to the crap that woman has been pulling with her. You should have nipped that in the bud first thing. No one should have to deal with the bullshit Isabel kept saying to her; had it been anyone except Felicity they would have buried you up to your neck with workplace grievances and lawsuits,” Dig shot back, then muttered, “Besides, if you had kept it in your pants with that shark maybe she wouldn’t have had to.”

“Enough Diggle,” Oliver warned him.

“You and the Rochev woman were involved?” Bruce asked. “Any chance that you might have been the leak? That she might have drugged you before your encounter?”

“It was one time and I left as soon as it was over. I never lost consciousness,” Oliver told him. He then turned his eyes toward his partner, “And the only reason I had sex with her in the first place was to distract her from the mission. My sleeping with the ‘shark’ bought us a few hours to get done what we needed to do.”

Bruce nodded, “I’ve…been there.” His lips tightened into a grimace before he continued. “Did she try to recruit Felicity before or after their altercation?”

“After,” Oliver answered. “Struck me as strange, too. That’s why I didn’t take it seriously at first. I thought Isabel was baiting her and Felicity was just overreacting.”

“Felicity may ramble when she’s nervous but she doesn’t overreact to anything when it comes to the mission. If she comes to you with intel you can take it to the bank,” Bruce told him sharply.

“There were extenuating circumstances,” Oliver flushed and gritted his teeth angrily. “And while I appreciate the insight, I think I know Felicity pretty well after more than three and a half years of working together, thank you.”

“Do you?” Bruce asked, raising a questioning eyebrow in his direction.

“Yes,” he snapped.

“Then tell me; what do you know about Felicity?” Bruce asked. “Because, according to you, she didn’t even tell you her last name until a few days ago.”

“Look——” Oliver started to get up from his seat and Diggle put a calming hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, let’s just calm down,” he told both men sharply. “If you two mess up the Lair I’m not cleaning it up so let’s just chill out and get back to business.”

Both men eyed each other tensely before Bruce broke the standoff.

“You’re right; I…apologize,” Bruce said reluctantly. “It was a cheap shot.”

“Fine,” Oliver said, although his short tone implied it was anything but.
Diggle shifted on the couch, his hand still clasped to Oliver’s shoulder as if holding him down. “How did Felicity get involved in your mission?” Diggle asked him curiously as Oliver got his temper under control. “She was what? Eighteen, nineteen?”

Bruce flushed, “Nineteen. I recruited her when she was eighteen but she left when she was nineteen.”

“That’s kind of young, isn’t it? I know her dad’s the CEO of your company but, still, she was just a kid,” Diggle said with a frown.

“She wasn’t a kid,” Bruce said a little sharply then cleared his throat, averting his gaze to the floor. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap.” He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed, “Felicity started MIT when she was thirteen years old and had a doctorate under her belt by the time I recruited her. Her research into decryption protocols using AI theorem was and still is light years beyond anything anyone else is doing and I wanted her to rebuild Watchtower for me after I read an article she published based on her graduate thesis.”

“Felicity has a doctorate?” Diggle asked, looking mildly impressed. “She never told me she had a PhD.” He turned to Oliver with a slight upturn of his lips, “Damn, no wonder she was so pissed about being your secretary.”

“You didn’t know that?” Bruce frowned.

“I knew she went to MIT but she doesn’t talk about her past much,” Diggle told him. He looked at Oliver, “You knew though, right?”

He shot him a dirty look, refusing to answer the question. “So you just went up to a teenaged girl and asked her to be your tech?” Oliver drawled, obviously still a bit peeved.

“No,” Bruce said with a hint of irritation. “I asked her to consult on a project but I never intended to pull her in. I just explained what I needed using vague language and said it was a side project I was working on. I told her I wanted her to consult for WayneTech, I had no idea she’d be able to figure it out that quickly but she’s a genius and I shouldn’t have underestimated her. Thirty seconds into my spiel she just looked me straight in the eye, told me she knew I was Batman, and then offered to build the system for me.” He scowled, “I tried to dissuade her but she pretty much had me dead to rights so I just let her in.”

Diggle snorted and both men looked at him, “Oh come on, neither of you find it hilarious that you both approached her in nearly the same way and she was able to figure out what both of you were into in under a minute?” At the matching grimaces that appeared on both men’s faces he began to chuckle, “Damn, that girl; I swear if she wanted to she could be downright dangerous. Honest to God, there are days when I think it should be her under the hood!”

Ignoring the other man’s chuckles, Bruce eyed both men carefully for his next question. “Were you aware that someone was targeting Felicity? That she had a hit put out on her?”

Both men tensed, the moment of levity disappearing in a flash. “When?” Oliver demanded, his expression livid.

“Do you know who ordered it?” Diggle asked, his jaw clenched and his eyes showing his concern as well as anger.

“Is that why you came here? To investigate a contract on Felicity?” Oliver growled.
“Huntress told me that someone offered her a contract on Felicity but that she turned it down. We don’t know who contracted the hit but we investigated and it appears that it was canceled shortly after inquiries were made.” He eyeballed both men.

“When was it taken out?” Oliver asked again harshly.

“Roughly eighteen months ago. Someone sent out feelers but then a few days later the contract was pulled. They were specifically looking for an out of town independent contractor through a very high end broker. It’s hard to find a middleman at that level with no ties to the League but the fact that they managed to and your team’s recent brushes with Ra’s and his affiliates leads me to believe they were trying to keep things under their radar,” Bruce told them then watched as Diggle and Oliver both glanced at one another in a silent exchange.

“When did Felicity find out about this?” Oliver asked his tone calmer although there was still an angry edge to it.

“After we did; my tech called her and told her about it just prior to my arrival.” Again the men exchanged glances.

“That would be around the same time as the election campaign,” Diggle said softly.

“Don’t,” Oliver told him, a muscle in his jaw working.

“The one where your mother ran against Sebastian Blood for mayor?” Bruce asked, his focus narrowing on Oliver.

“It’s handled,” Oliver said roughly, his voice hard as steel.

Bruce ignored him, “Is there something I need to know?”

“I said it’s handled,” Oliver said firmly.

“If it affects Felicity then I need to know,” Bruce said in a voice that had been known to make grown men lose bladder control.

“And I said it’s my city and if justice has to be meted out then it will be me who handles it.”

Bruce looked at him, the tense lines in his body, the corded muscles under his clothes ready to spring into action at any moment, and made the rare decision to back off. Whatever this was it was personal to Queen and he didn’t have time for a turf war. “Fine, but I’m keeping Felicity with me in Gotham while that happens and she doesn’t return until I know for sure she’s in the clear.”

“We can handle our own—” Dig began but Oliver cut him off.

“Agreed,” he said harshly. “Like I said, we can’t protect her anymore.”

“Oliver,” Diggle said with a growl as he turned on his partner.

Queen turned to his bodyman and another silent exchange took place until the other man finally jerked his head in a nod even though there was now an undeniable tension between them. Bruce took note of the fact that, though the former soldier didn’t like the idea of releasing Felicity into another person’s care, he wasn’t going to argue with Queen’s decision; not in front of an outsider. The fact that a decorated war hero with John Diggle’s reputation would follow the lead of a man Bruce had initially thought may have been just playing at vigilante brought his estimation of Queen up by several degrees.
Oliver looked over to Bruce, the mask of the Arrow creeping over his features as his jaw clenched. “We’ve been sharing a lot of information with you but so far we’ve gotten nothing back in return. Who is Ra’s al Ghul to you? What do you know that we don’t?”

“First you tell me who trained you,” Bruce told him. “That was League training; you don’t learn that just by dodging bullets.”

“You’re wrong,” Oliver told him, his jaw set. “The man who trained me was a prisoner on the island named Yao Fei. He and his daughter, Shado, were also on the run from the people who were trying to kill me.”

“General Yao Fei?” Bruce asked, considering that for a moment.

“You knew him?” Oliver asked in surprise.

“Only by reputation,” Bruce said quietly. “He was set up; he took the fall for the massacre of an entire village even though the evidence was thin at best and obviously trumped up, then disappeared before he was arrested for mass murder and treason. It was rumored that he was a member of the League of Shadows but that he had crossed Ra’s.” He nodded to himself, “Now things are starting to make a bit more sense. Given how you handled yourself when we went toe to toe and your connection to Lian Yu I’m fairly certain it’s the same man.”

“Your turn; who is Ra’s al Ghul to you and what is your connection to the League?” Oliver demanded.

Bruce studied both men carefully before deciding how to answer, “Ra’s al Ghul is the leader of The League of Shadows and The League of Assassins. In essence both Leagues are one and the same with the same goals and the same leadership. His name translates as ‘The Demon’s Head’ and he believes that the world is filled with corruption and that it must be cleansed of all evil. Some might classify him as an eco-terrorist but it goes much further than just some radical tree hugger looking to save the environment. He believes he can create a better world by targeting corruption like a cancer and destroying it, only he doesn’t just target individuals, he targets entire cities and governments. He believes that the evil of an individual is but a symptom of a greater wrong; evil to him is a cancer and to excise a cancer you have to cut away not just the diseased tissue but some of the healthy tissue as well. There are no innocents to him, no collateral damage; just the drive to cleanse the world and bring about his prophesy.”

“Prophesy?” Oliver asked with a scowl. “What is he; a militant fundamentalist?”

“Not quite,” Bruce said grimly. “He’s not affiliated with any specific religious doctrine. He’s no longer sane and he suffered hallucinations that he interpreted as visions that spoke of a new world free of the evil of men which has become the driving force behind everything he does. He was behind different plots to take out Gotham the same way Malcolm Merlyn tried to take down the Glades. If what your friend, the Black Canary, said is correct then that’s not a coincidence.” He paused, “You said you were given a book; may I see it?”

Oliver got up and reached beside Bruce into the bottom drawer of Felicity’s workstation and handed it to him. “That one belonged to my father but we know that both my mother and Malcolm had a copy as well.”

Bruce looked at the leather bound journal carefully starting with the symbol on the front. “This is the symbol of the League of Shadows, a group of powerful people recruited or somehow associated with Ra’s al Ghul to bring about his perfect world. The League of Assassins is the, for lack of a better word, servant of the League of Shadows and carry out their orders but both groups are equally
deadly in their own way and every single member of the League is willing to kill or die for Ra’s cause.”

“How are you connected?” Oliver asked.

There was a split second of debate in Bruce’s mind about how far he should trust Queen before he spoke, “It’s no secret that my parents were murdered. From the time I was a boy I was determined to avenge their deaths by learning all the skills necessary to accomplish my goal of ending the corruption in Gotham. I trained as much as I could with some of the greatest martial arts masters in secret, and when I left college I traveled the world, seeking out anyone who could help me.”

“I traveled to Nepal where I heard rumors of a man named Ra’s al Ghul. He was an almost god-like figure, revered and feared for his all-consuming mission to stamp out evil. I traveled all over that part of the world, tracking him, following lead after lead until I wound up in a village located between Pakistan and Tibet called Nanda Parbat. Don’t bother looking it up on a map, you won’t find it,” Bruce told them. “Another name for it is Shangri-La and the village was nestled in a hidden valley between the Kunlun Mountains, the Himalayas, and the Tibetan Plateau. I found him and, after he decided I was worthy, I became his student.”

Both Oliver and Diggle tensed but it was Queen who spoke, “You’re a member of this League of Shadows?”

“No,” Batman said evenly, for even without cape and cowl, it was Batman who was speaking and not Bruce. “I trained with him, learned his secrets, but when the time came to be initiated into the League I didn’t go through with it. Ra’s revealed to me his ultimate plan was to level Gotham and any other city he determined was a source of the cancer that was evil. He and the rest of the League had set themselves up as judge, jury, and executioner, and he was determined to bring about his new world without any regard to innocent lives. As I said before, in his opinion anyone touched by evil, however innocent, is therefore tainted by it. I fought my way out of Nanda Parbat thinking Ra’s was dead only to find out he survived.”

He shifted in the chair. “Over the years we’ve had many run-ins. Despite the fact that Ra’s seeks to stamp out anything he considers ‘evil’ he’s not above using those who commit evil acts to further his goals. His League of Assassins don’t just target the corrupt, they’re elite contract killers as well and the money they collect goes to fund his mission. The League of Shadows is even more pervasive and dangerous in a way because they believe he’s a hero, a visionary, and he recruits the rich and powerful; men and women who have the ability to open doors and fund plots to overthrow whole cities and countries and all in the name of Ra’s.” He looked from one man to the other, “Every member of the League has made a blood oath to the organization. They serve him with an almost fanatical devotion. If Ra’s al Ghul decides to come to Starling personally it will make the Glades disaster look like a fender bender in comparison.”


“Why didn’t Felicity tell me any of this?” Oliver asked in frustration. “I know she was trying to keep your identity a secret but she knew about the journal, about Ra’s al Ghul—why not give us some of the answers she already knew?”

“Felicity wouldn’t have known about this,” Bruce said as he flipped through the pages of the journal. “She’s heard of Ra’s al Ghul through her access to some of my files but I’ve kept most of what I know to myself. All she knows is that I consider him to be my enemy but she doesn’t know why. Not only that, but I always made sure Felicity’s role in my team was limited. I wanted to keep her safe. I never wanted her to share in this burden, become corrupted by it like others have been in the
past.” He shut the journal in his fist, his jaw tight and a steady throb in his temple reminding him of the beating he’d taken earlier. “I thought that by pushing her away I was doing her a favor but now I see that was wrong. No matter what I did this was always going to follow her.”

“It’s my fault,” Oliver said quietly, a far off look in his eyes. “I put her out there, more than once. I’ve nearly gotten her killed on a few occasions. If I hadn’t…”

“You know what? You’re both acting like a couple of idiots!” Diggle burst out as he looked on them with disdain. Both men looked up in surprise. “Listen to you sad-sacks whine about that girl like she’s dead or like you forced her into something she didn’t choose for herself! Need I remind you that Felicity is a goddamn genius and she has more natural affinity for this stuff than anyone I’ve ever met, present company included. You two had to train for years to get to where you are and she just fell into it and can still run circles around any one of us!” He snorted, “You two might see those short skirts and glasses and think she’s some fragile little girlie-girl but I know better. I’ve seen what that girl can do both on the mat and behind a keyboard. I trained her; I’ve been training her on almost a daily basis for nearly two years now and she’s never backed down! She can fight and she’s a better shot than half the men I trained in the Army. Every time I’ve set a challenge in front of her she’s met it and then some! Hell, in a couple of years I’d be willing to bet she could give both of you a run for your money if she wanted to and I’d go to war with her in a goddamn heartbeat.” He looked from one man to the other. “If Felicity were here she’d slap both of you upside the head and tell you to get your heads out of your asses and get back in the game. We’ve got a problem so let’s concentrate on getting done what needs to be done and save the hearts and flowers bullshit for later.”

Bruce looked at the other man and gave him a respectful nod. “You’re right, Felicity is her own person and I think we’re both guilty of overlooking that.”

“True,” Oliver grudgingly agreed.

Diggle looked from one man to the other, “Now that you two have gotten your bitch and whine session out of the way, what are we going to do about all of this?”

Bruce sat back in the chair and rubbed his chin in quiet contemplation before speaking. “The way I see it our missions are not dissimilar. We both have common goals; a need to keep Felicity safe and to uncover whatever plans the League is making and why Ra’s al Ghul’s name keeps turning up here in Starling. I have a proposal I’d like to offer you both.”

“Go on,” Oliver said and Diggle nodded beside him.

“I’ve been able to develop a large network of operatives and trained associates. I’d like to send you some of my people to offer their assistance. I’ll have to coordinate with them first but with Felicity in Gotham you’re down a man and you’re stretched thin as it is. Also, and please don’t take offence at this, but you both could use some more feet on the ground as well as someone to take over the training of this new protégé of yours.” Bruce noted both men’s expressions of displeasure at that. “Not that I don’t feel you’re perfectly capable, but you need to concentrate on keeping eyes on the Rochev woman as well as protecting your city. The man I’m thinking of sending you, Tim, codename Red Robin, has experience dealing with the League and I trained him personally; he also happens to be my son. He can act as our official representative while he’s here. He’s in line to inherit Wayne Enterprises and is somewhat of a computer savant, although not quite as talented or experienced as Felicity. You shouldn’t have any problems explaining his presence to Isabel.” He took a breath as he considered his next move. It was risky because if Felicity didn’t agree to cooperate he’d be down, not one, but two valuable members of his team until this was done. “You made Felicity your EA; I’m assuming you did that because you weren’t sure if your offices had been infiltrated and you needed someone you trusted to be your gatekeeper?”
“Yeah, Felicity wasn’t happy about it but I couldn’t see any other way,” Oliver said ruefully.

Bruce nodded, “I would have done the same thing. Have you hired another assistant yet?”

“No, I’ve been making do with temps.”

“I have someone in mind. I’ll have to ask her first though,” Bruce said with a grimace. “Like Felicity, she’s not fond of me making decisions for her but she can be trusted and she has extensive administrative experience. In addition, she can act as your tech in your missions and has had hand to hand combat training so she can handle herself should the need arise.”

“Her handle wouldn’t be Oracle, would it?” Diggle asked curiously.

Bruce’s gaze fell on the other man searchingly, “Did Felicity tell you about her?”

“She just gave me a code key and told me to contact ‘Oracle’ in case we needed help. She said she was her counterpart in your organization.”

Bruce nodded. “That was smart of her but then Felicity always was thinking two steps ahead,” he admitted grudgingly. “Since Felicity will be with me in Gotham I can ask her to man Watchtower while Oracle takes her place here—that is if I can get both of them to agree to it. Before I ask though I should mention that Oracle is a paraplegic; she was injured by one of my enemies a few years back and is now in a wheelchair. Your Lair doesn’t appear to be wheelchair accessible.”

“A wheelchair?” Diggle asked dubiously. “Are you sure she’s capable of handling all of this? I mean, I know she’s good if you and Felicity both vouch for her but we’ve got to run on the assumption that we’ve been blown. If things go tits up and they storm the club or Oliver is attacked while she’s in his office it could get ugly.”

“Before Barbara--Barbara Gordon,” he clarified for them. “Before she was Oracle she was one of my protégés and fought under the codename ‘Batgirl’. She may not have the use of her legs but she was able to channel her skills into a type of sitting judo and she’s a master of eskrima with expertise in small firearms. Also, in addition to helping Felicity build the Watchtower system, she built and modified her own wheelchair and made it combat ready. Trust me when I say that no matter what happens she can handle herself.”

“Damn,” Diggle said, looking suitably impressed. “Even your IT girl is making me feel like an amateur. Talk about a blow to the ego.”

Oliver tapped his lips, his elbows still balanced on his knees, “We have a freight elevator she can use or I can help her set something up offsite.”

“I’ll speak to the owner of the house Felicity was living in and see if she can stay there after the repairs are complete. It’s one-story and already has a ramp on the side of the porch so it should do. According to the landlord several of the houses in the neighborhood have been on the market for well over a year. If I need to I’ll buy the damn thing.” Bruce said gruffly.

“I think that Bruce Wayne buying up quaint little bungalows in Starling may raise a few red flags,” Oliver said wryly. “Don’t worry about your associates, I’ll see to it they’re both kept comfortable while they’re here.”

“Thank you,” Bruce said.

“No thanks needed,” Oliver told him. “If that book is connected to the League and Ra’s al Ghul then that means Isabel may be an even bigger threat than we think. Her name is in that book and she
knows too much about us which means others may as well. If they really are after Felicity and not just the Arrow then it will be up to you to keep her safe while we handle the rest of it from here.” His tone became grim, “If anything happens to us you can get her out of the country or help her go underground until things settle down. Isabel has always fixated on my friendship with Felicity but if I can give her reason to believe that’s over maybe she’ll move on.”

Bruce got up from his seat and offered Oliver then Diggle his handshake, “I promise you I won’t let anything happen to her.” He looked back to Oliver, “I’ll give you all the support I can. I’ll talk to Lucius and make sure your company gets the contract so that will be at least one less thing for you to worry about. I’ll also begin discreet inquiries into Rochev and Stellmoor and get back to you if I hear anything.” He frowned, “Have you thought about how taking down Rochev might affect QC?”

“This is more important,” Oliver said a bit gruffly. “If I lose the company, so be it.”

“Worse comes to worst, I’ll buy up her shares myself or give you whatever financial support I can so that you can do it,” Bruce told him.

“I…appreciate it,” he said with a nod. “I’ll walk you out,” Diggle moved off to give them some privacy as the two men ascended the staircase. As soon as they were past the door leading to the Lair Oliver turned to him, “Look, like I said, I appreciate you helping us but I should warn you that if I find out that you’ve hurt Felicity again I’m coming for you and it won’t be pretty.”

“Understood,” Bruce said in the low growl of the Bat. “And I hope you know that if she ever decides to return to Starling City I’ll expect the same from you.”

Oliver offered him his hand again and Bruce took it in a firm clasp. “Take care of her, Wayne.”

“I will and…thank you,” Bruce said quietly as he headed off toward his rental and back to Gotham.

Oliver made his way back down to the Lair, his countenance grim and his gait heavy. Diggle looked up from where he was preparing for their training session and snorted, “Hey man, I know this situation sucks but she’ll be fine. She’s got Batman and a whole slew of his people protecting her. If you want to worry about somebody, worry about us. We’re the ones with bull’s-eyes on our backs.”

“I’m just—” he stopped and scrubbed his hand through his hair, “Are we making a mistake trusting this guy? I mean, what do we really know about Batman anyway?”

Diggle sighed and leaned heavily against the weapons case, “Felicity worked for his organization before she came here and, even with the bad blood between them, I get the impression that the last thing he’d do is risk her safety. As long as our best interests and hers match up he’s not going to make a move against us. I think we can trust him.”

“Yeah,” Oliver said, his face still troubled as he grabbed the tape and began wrapping his knuckles.

Dig paused, his features stilling in quiet contemplation before he spoke, “Are we going to talk about the bomb Wayne dropped or what?”

“Which one?” Oliver said roughly.

“The hit,” Dig watched as Oliver tensed. “Oliver—“

“Don’t,” he told him.
“Do you think your mother put that contract on Felicity?” He asked, ignoring the set to the other man’s shoulders.

Oliver didn’t say anything but his movements became jerky and agitated.

“Timing makes sense,” Diggle said. “I doubt Blood would have ordered it and Slade was more into the direct approach. Of course, it also could have been Walter Steele; unlikely, but very possible.”

“I don’t know,” he said gruffly, “but I’m going to find out.”

“And worst case scenario?” Dig asked, watching his reaction carefully. “If you find out your mother ordered the hit, what then? Are we going to keep this from Thea or what?”

“I’ll take care of it,” he said, his face lost in shadows.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I’ll take care of it,” Oliver bit out.

Diggle shifted uncomfortably, “You can’t keep this from your sister, Oliver. She’s part of the team now and it’s taken you guys a long time to get to a good place with everything your mother’s done to you both. I know it’s hard, but she needs to know.”

“Moira’s dead,” Oliver said flatly. “It doesn’t matter anymore. If we find out she ordered the hit then the danger is past and that’s one less thing to worry about. Everything else is irrelevant and Thea doesn’t need to know anything.”

“She won’t appreciate that logic is she finds out and you know that,” Dig pointed out gently.

“She still loves our mother, Dig,” he told him. “She should be able to have at least that.”

“She was your mother, too—”

“She gave birth to me,” Oliver clarified, “but that woman, the woman who conspired with Malcolm Merlyn, who hid my son from me, who could threaten to kill one of the only people I trust just because she dared to tell me the truth, the woman she became in the end; that was not my mother.”

“If it was her she canceled the hit,” he said quietly. “That means she changed her mind. She didn’t go through with it.”

Oliver turned to him slowly, his eyes more cold and hard than Diggle had ever seen them, “She threatened Felicity, used emotional blackmail to keep her quiet and arranged a hit to take care of loose ends. What she didn’t count on was Felicity’s loyalty to me. Once I knew what she had done I warned her that if she ever crossed me by going after Felicity I would send her straight to hell. I reconciled with her after that but part of me never forgave her, and she knew it.” He put on the sparring gloves and squeezed his hand into a fist causing the leather to whine in protest. “She didn’t cancel the contract in a fit on conscience; she canceled it because the damage was already done and she knew I would expose her if I thought for a second she had any hand in it. I’m not worried about my mother right now; she’d dead and buried. What I’m worried about now, besides Isabel and every other fucking thing we have to deal with, is who else knew about the hit and if she left any loose ends that might cause blowback onto Thea.”

“Do you think Mark Francis knew?” Dig asked curiously. “He was her campaign manager.”

Oliver shook his head, “Probably not,” he said. “Mark’s a political shark. Dirty politics is one thing,
murder is another. If he found out Moira had skeletons in her closet he’d either spin it or dump her, he wouldn’t hire a hitman. If anyone knew anything, it’s Walter Steele.”

Dig stopped to consider that for a moment, “Do you think he would do something like that? He and Moira were divorced by then.”

“Doesn’t matter, he still loved her. Besides, if he did conspire with Moira or contract the hit himself, it wasn’t about Moira, it was business,” he said in a hard voice. “He had a lot riding on her winning that campaign and he was on the line for backing my bid to keep QC. A scandal wouldn’t have just ruined us but it would have ruined him as well.”

Dig seemed to contemplate that for a moment, “He did take over her campaign and the mayor’s office after Blood and his army tried to bring down the city and he’s been a friend to the Arrow. If you confront him there could be backlash.”

“The Arrow isn’t confronting him, I am,” he said firmly.

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

“No, but if Walter is a danger to my family and to Felicity then he needs to be dealt with,” Oliver said coldly.

Dig exhaled loudly in consternation, “Oliver, I agree something has to be done, but Thea loves him. He’s all she has left of your mother--”

“If he’s dirty then he’s going down,” Oliver told him in a voice that would brook no arguments.

“You shouldn’t be the one to do it.” Diggle said quietly, his face lost in the shadows. “It’s too much to ask of anyone, Oliver; even you. If anything permanent has to be done then I’ll take care of it.”

Oliver looked up at Diggle and snorted, “I won’t kill him, Diggle. It’s tempting but I wouldn’t give him the out.” He smiled coldly, “If he conspired with my mother to kill Felicity or if he planned it himself then he’s either going to jail or he’s leaving town permanently and he’ll give up all his interest in QC before he goes. I won’t have a ticking time bomb in our midst when we’ve already got enough on our plates with Isabel.”

“There will be fallout,” Dig warned. “Your sister, the company; everything you’ve worked for could come crashing down around you.”

“Like I told Wayne I’m beyond worrying about that now. Besides, my life is already a nuclear fucking winter, Dig,” He said, heading for the Muk Yan Jong training dummy and started punching out his frustrations, his fists flying between the wooden arms and slapping at the slats with lightning fast speed.

“Oliver, this thing you’re feeling; it isn’t just about your mom,” Diggle said with a superior air.

He looked up and clenched his jaw, “Just…drop it, Dig.” He engaged the hard teak dummy once again, his hands slapping it in a meditative rhythm.

“Why can’t you just admit you’re in love with that girl?” he said, ignoring him.

“Because that’s not what’s happening,” Oliver said stubbornly.

“Bullshit,” Dig snorted. “I don’t know what the hell has been going on over the last few days but this thing with you and Felicity has been brewing since day one. I thought for sure after Sara left that
you’d see that and then six months ago…” he paused and shook his head. “I know…I know we touched on this a few days ago, but I still gotta ask; do you…do you still think about it?"

“Every fucking day,” he bit out roughly as he continued to slap at the wooden arms of the dummy.

“Yes,” Dig said quietly, his face lost in shadow. “I keep thinking about how she marched right up to Slade and got between the two of you. I was too far away to see it clearly and I thought…” He clenched his jaw. “You screamed her name over and over and I thought that if that girl died that there was no way you’d ever come back from it, that none of us would ever get past it without her to keep us together. You were screaming and then the explosion,” his jaw clenched and he closed his eyes. “That’s the last thing I remember before I woke up in the air ambulance. I thought she was dead. I asked and when they said the only female survivor they found at the site was Sara, I just knew. A couple of days later, I woke up,” he gave a brief chuckle, “and she was putting a coffee mug full of flowers on my nightstand and…fuck,” he took a moment to center himself with a deep breath. “All I could do is smile and thank God that she lived and Slade was dead. I thought then that you’d get your head out of your ass and tell that girl how you felt but you hooked back up with Sara again and we all had to sit back and watch that train wreck play out. Thank God Sara at least had enough sense to end it quick this time but then you had to go after Laurel again and…”

He shook his head and made a sound of disgust, “I wanted to kick your ass when I watched you do that to Felicity; every goddamn time you’d get close to showing that girl how you felt you’d use Sara, Connor, Laurel, the mission, work, or some other excuse to make some distance between you and it wasn’t fair to anyone. And the way you let her speak to Felicity after all she’d been through,” his lips thinned as he pinned the man with an angry glare. “If I didn’t have a broken femur at the time, I swear to God I would have shoved my foot up your ass for that shit.”

Oliver met his glare with one of his own, “I’ve heard this before; from you, from Roy…”

“Well maybe you should hear it again since you didn’t seem to learn your lesson the last time!” Diggle snapped back.

“I did, and I made it right!” He said with a scowl. “I broke it off with Laurel and I apologized, remember?”

“To me and Roy, but did you apologize to Felicity?” He asked in a hard tone. Oliver dropped his eyes and didn’t answer. Dig just shook his head, “I didn’t think so. You know, even Sara could see you were in love with Felicity, Laurel could obviously see it; everyone saw it except the two of you. That girl loves you Oliver; she marched into the jaws of death for you more than once. She faced down Slade and then spit in his eye for you. He had his hands on her and she—”

“I was there! I saw it, I heard it; I was right fucking there!” Oliver said angrily, finally breaking in the light of the other man’s punishing words and rounding on him with a fierce expression on his face. “I know what she said! I know everything that could have happened! I watched as Slade…” He clenched his jaw, “I hear him talking to her like that in my nightmares every single time I close my eyes. I spent days after that thinking about what could have happened if she had been in the blast radius, or worse, if she had actually gone with him what he would have done to her. I see her press that button every single day only she’s the one in bloody fucking chunks at the end of it, not Slade, and I know she did all of it for me! That’s the point! I can’t do this; why can’t you see that? I can’t let her do that again—not for me, not again! I don’t…” He grimaced and gripped the arms of the training dummy tightly as he avoided the other man’s gaze, “This, whatever it is, it isn’t love. I’ve been in love before, Dig, a few times. Not lust, not some kind of teenage hormone-fueled crap, but real love. Whatever this is between me and Felicity it’s different than that.”

“Are you trying to tell me that all this is just you wanting to get into Felicity’s pants?” Dig asked
angrily. “Because if you can tell me that and keep a straight face then I’ll put my fist down your goddamn throat myself!”

“No!” He said testily. “It’s not sex either! It’s… it’s—-fuck! I don’t know what the hell it is!” He rubbed his hand over his mouth as though ill.

“So you say,” Diggle said sarcastically. “Me? I only know what I see, man, and that girl has you sprung.”

Oliver shook his head, refusing to hear it. “It can’t happen, not with her.” He began running through the empty hand techniques of Wing Chun, going through the alphabet of punches until his movements were a blur of motion, muscle memory, and meditation.

“Why not?” Diggle asked genuinely perplexed by his partner’s stubbornness. “She knows your secret, she’s a part of your life both in the hood and out of it, she’s smart, beautiful—-“

“That’s just it!” He growled grabbing the dummy, his meditation broken. “She’s everywhere— there’s no breathing room when she’s around, no escape! I can’t compartmentalize her like I can everything else. It’s just-—” He took a deep breath and set his jaw, “It’s too much with her, Dig. This thing between us is all encompassing and it makes my chest ache and all logic fly out of the window. She makes me lose focus and I can’t do that. If I lose sight of what we’re doing here then the results would be disastrous for all of us.” He looked off to the side, refusing to meet the other man’s eyes. “I can’t do what we do and be with her, Dig. I just can’t. And I can’t be with her knowing that eventually she’s going to jump in front of another bullet for me and I can’t stop her. There just isn’t enough of me left over for that.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means that I’m barely hanging on as it is,” Oliver said angrily. “I’m trying to balance being the Arrow with being a CEO when I barely have a clue what I’m doing, plus I have to be there for my sister because I find myself, yet again, having to deal with the fact that our mother was apparently a fucking sociopath! Literally thousands of people are depending on me! It’s all on me!” He said, jabbing a thumb at his chest. “I have so much on me right now I can barely breathe and Felicity…” he shook his head, “She makes me want to just chuck it all and run, just grab her and hide until it all just goes away. I’ve never…” He dropped his chin and shut his eyes, “I… She scares the shit out of me, Dig.” He looked up at him, finally meeting his eyes again. “Do you know why I let Isabel treat her like crap for as long as I did? Or why I let Laurel spout off like that?”

“I assumed you either didn’t see it or you were afraid of rousing their suspicions,” Diggle said in a low tone, his eyes narrowing.

“No, I saw everything and I could have put a stop to it at any point but I chose not to.”

“Why would you do that?” Diggle asked angrily. “Laurel, okay, she was way the fuck out of line but she’s Sara’s sister and Lance’s daughter so I get cutting her some slack, but Isabel; some of that crap Isabel was saying about her—-“

“I did it to maintain some distance like you said!” Oliver shot back angrily. “I’m not blind, Dig! Felicity is the one person who has always been able to see right through me. I have no secrets from that girl, she just—she gets under my skin and lives there, you know? As long as Isabel kept her distracted, or Laurel kept her away from me, it made it easier for me to pretend that nothing was happening between us. I can’t do what I do and be with her, Dig. Whatever the hell this is that I’m feeling it just can’t happen, not now, maybe not ever.”
“You’re going to lose her, you know that, right?” Diggle asked him, his eyes hard. “Don’t make the same mistakes I did, man. I lost two women I loved because I ran. Don’t push her away because she might not come back.”

“Good,” he said resignedly. “Maybe she’ll be better off. At least he can keep her safe which is more than I can say. All I’ve done since I met her is put her in danger. No one’s luck lasts forever; how many more close calls do we have left before we reach one time too many? How many more times do I put her in the line of fire before I get her killed or crippled, Dig? Didn’t you hear what he said about that tech of his; Oracle? She’s in a wheelchair because of his mission, because one of his enemies put her there. Fuck!” He shoved the dummy in frustration, “I couldn’t even keep her safe from my own goddamn mother, how the hell am I supposed to keep her safe from everyone else?!”

Diggle clenched his jaw and glared at him, “That’s a load of crap! He can’t keep her any safer than we can and she doesn’t want that even if he could!” He pointed towards the door to the Lair, “And I’ll tell you something else, he’s full of shit too if he thinks that keeping her safe is what all this is about! He wants her, Oliver! He flew three thousand miles to get her back and you can’t be bothered to walk across the fucking room! You and I both know that the last thing you want is for her to wind up with Wayne and if you don’t stop all this self-recrimination and whiny bullshit he’s going to make his play and you’ll have fucked up your one shot at something real!”

“ Enough! What’s done is done; it’s over so just drop it!” Oliver said angrily, cutting through the air with his hands as he grabbed his hood and bow. “I’m not up for sparring tonight. I’m heading out on patrol.”

Diggle watched as the other man got into his leathers, shaking his head silently in defeat as he headed over to man the coms.

Bruce called Barbara from the jet to let her know that Felicity was headed back to Gotham on a commercial flight and told her to alert Alfred of her arrival time so she wouldn’t have to get a cab home. After all he’d put her through it was the least he could do.

Her phone sat in front of him along with the white pharmacy bag from her bedroom. The memories of the other night came to him then; the way she looked when he held her in his arms, the expression on her face when she woke up with her sweet lips still swollen from his kisses, the taste of her that lingered on his tongue—those images still haunted him. He’d rejected her for a second time out of fear, and not for her safety, but for his own. Barbara was right when she said he should have just called her or gotten in touch some other way. Hopping on the jet was a mistake as was every decision he’d made since. This whole sordid mess was entirely his fault. He should have left her alone and not interfered. He should have known better. He picked up the bag and considered it for a moment before shoving it into his briefcase. Out of sight was not out of mind, however.

Bruce was not a monk. Even as the Batman he enjoyed his fair share of women. To him it had always been a simple matter of release, a way to eliminate stress while satisfying a biological imperative, but no matter how caught up in the act he had become it was merely sex and he never lost control. The only biological child he’d ever fathered, Damian, was conceived against his will and his knowledge and he was never really a father to the boy. He’d tried to be, tried to curb the boy’s murderous rages, but Damian had been tainted by the darkness that drove him. As grieved as he was when the boy died he was almost grateful for it as well. He’d never willingly allowed himself to lose that control with any woman, never risked his seed taking root, except with Felicity.

He’d taken Felicity twice now without once considering her safety or his own; the first time was four years ago and the last was a few days ago. It wasn’t disease he was worried about, he was clean and
he knew she was as well, but he could have easily left her pregnant with his child and that was unacceptable. Although a primitive part of himself could easily imagine holding a child that was part of both of them he also knew how unfair that would be to her. He wasn’t capable of being a husband or a father. He was too selfish, too obsessed with his mission, and he knew that his lack of loving care would have eventually destroyed her. As for a child…

Bruce had opened his home to many young men and women but he’d never been a father to any of them. He’d been a taskmaster, a teacher, but not a father. The best scenario to come out of giving Felicity his child through that one reckless act would be that he’d claim it and her only to watch it be turned into yet another warrior for the mission or a perversion of innocence and humanity like Damian. It would be inevitable and he could not stand the thought of hurting her like that.

Not that Felicity would have anything to do with him at this point anyway. He’d driven her into the arms of Queen and for all he knew that was where her heart now lay. After their fight, and subsequent talk, he now understood why she joined the Arrow’s mission. It wasn’t just that it was a worthy cause or that Oliver Queen was, like him, driven to seek justice for his city; it was that Queen needed her in a way Bruce never did.

She was central to their cause, an invaluable member of the Arrow’s team. Bruce had designed the Batman so that even he could be replaced. He could die and Batman would live on with Dick or Tim or even Luke behind the cape and cowl. Batman would be immortal but Oliver Queen was just one man whose only back up was his bodyguard and an IT specialist. He’d almost forgotten what it was like when it was just Alfred and himself in the Batcave. Of course she joined him, how could she not?

And now she’s slept with him, Bruce thought unhappily. He wasn’t jealous. No, that was a lie; he was jealous but he had no right to be. He’d taken everything she had to give and thrown it back in her face in the cruelest way possible--twice. Worse yet, he’d driven her into the arms of another man, one so much like himself that he even hurt her in the exact same way for the exact same reasons. She’d never forgive him for this last betrayal. It was done and she would never trust him with her heart again. Just the idea of living in a world without Felicity Smoak’s smile was nearly enough to send him to his knees.

Even as a child her smile could chase away the demons that haunted his nightmares. The first time they’d met she wasn’t even five years old and, even then, she had a hold on him he couldn’t explain. Lucius had invited him to his office before he left for his last year at Oxford to go over the terms of his allowance as provided by the trust left to him in his parent’s will. Evie had been dead less than six months and Lucius was only just beginning to return to the office full time. He’d been working from home for much of the previous year but Bruce remembered clearly walking into the office that had once belonged to his father to see this tiny little blonde haired creature sitting perched on Lucius’s lap coloring as he talked on the phone and waved him in to sit.

“Come in,” he mouthed before continuing his conversation with whoever was on the other end of the line.

Bruce sat in the large leather armchair across from his desk and waited for Lucius to complete his call. The little girl on Lucius’s lap looked up at him curiously, her big blue eyes peering at him over pink framed glasses that kept slipping down her pert nose. She kept brushing back her wild white blonde curls that had escaped from a messy ponytail and he noted that her fingertips were painted bright pink with tiny sparkling stickers on each of her neatly trimmed fingernails. She looked up at him as he examined her curiously, offered him a sweet smile, then began to color in earnest once more without saying anything.
“Sorry about that Bruce,” Lucius said as he placed the phone back on the receiver. He pulled out a file and placed it in front of him on the desk. “I just need you to sign—“

“Mr. Fox,” Lucius’s secretary peered into the room. “Sorry to disturb you sir, but the meeting is just about to break up and you told me to let you know.”

“Oh, right. Yes. Tell them I’ll be along in a minute, thank you,” he sighed and turned to Bruce again. “Again, I’m sorry about that. It’s been a crazy day today. Peggy Ann fell and broke a tooth so she had to go to the dentist for an emergency root canal, Tanya is out of town on Foundation business, and so I had to take Baby with me to the office at the last second. I just need to step out for a minute while you can read those over and then I’ll be right back so we can go over any questions you might have.”

“That’s fine, sir,” Bruce said with a nod.

Lucius looked down at the little girl who was still coloring in his lap, “Baby, why don’t you go out and sit with Miss Betty while I go to my meeting?”

“I can watch her if you like, sir,” Bruce said before he could reconsider. ‘Where did that even come from?’ He’d wondered at the time. He’d never had any experience babysitting before and the last thing he wanted to do was be stuck taking care of a whiny four year old all afternoon.

“Are you sure?” Lucius asked uncertainly and then he knew exactly why he’d offered. It was the look on the other man’s face that had prompted him. Despite the warm smile on his face, Lucius’s eyes were filled with such loss and sorrow it was nearly palatable. The only time it ever seemed to lift was when his eyes fell on the little girl who was still silent, still scribbling away, as if completely undisturbed by the idea of being left with a virtual stranger. Bruce recognized that pain. It was the same pain he’d felt every day since his parents had been murdered. Some part of him wanted to relieve some of that burden, if only for a minute or two, from the one man his father had called ‘friend’ besides Alfred Pennyworth.

“Yeah, it’s fine. No sense in making her get up and have to drag all her stuff into reception,” Bruce told him with a passable imitation of casual indifference.

“That sound good to you?” Lucius asked uncertainly and then he knew exactly why he’d offered. It was the look on the other man’s face that had prompted him. Despite the warm smile on his face, Lucius’s eyes were filled with such loss and sorrow it was nearly palatable. The only time it ever seemed to lift was when his eyes fell on the little girl who was still silent, still scribbling away, as if completely undisturbed by the idea of being left with a virtual stranger. Bruce recognized that pain. It was the same pain he’d felt every day since his parents had been murdered. Some part of him wanted to relieve some of that burden, if only for a minute or two, from the one man his father had called ‘friend’ besides Alfred Pennyworth.

“Okay Daddy,” Felicity said kissing his cheek before allowing herself to be shifted from his lap then lowered back into the vacated chair.

After assuring Bruce he’d only be a minute Lucius hurried out of the room leaving Bruce alone with the little girl. He perused the papers quickly, initialing and signing where indicated while keeping one eye trained on Lucius’s step-daughter, unsure of what would happen if he let her out of his sight. ‘Did four year olds do things like stuff crayons in their mouths and choke to death?’ He’d wondered with some trepidation. Still, after a few minutes of silence broken only by the near hypnotic sound of the crayons scrubbing against the thick sketchpad, he nearly forgot she was even there and started reading through the papers more carefully.

“Daddy said you’re going to lawyer school,” she said without looking up from her drawing.

“Yeah, uh yes. I have one more year left at Oxford and then I’m going to Yale Law,” he said then cursed himself for being taken off guard by the little girl. “Why aren’t you in school?” “Did kids her age even go to school?” He mused. He vaguely recalled going to school at that age but the memories of his life before his parent’s deaths were hazy at best in comparison to every other memory that
“My Mama died,” Felicity said in a casual tone.

“What does that have to do with going to school?” Bruce frowned then realized how callous that must have come across. He was about to apologize when she spoke.

“It just does. I can’t go to school because Mama is dead,” she explained, her eyes bright and sharp as they looked him over.

“My parents died and I still had to go to school,” Bruce shot back before he could stop himself. His cheeks colored as soon as he realized he was actually arguing with a little kid.

“That was different; both your mama and daddy died at the same time,” she said as though the reasoning behind it was perfectly logical.

“So?” He challenged, his eyebrows knitting together in consternation. The kid looked cute but she was kind of a brat.

“So they had each other and my Daddy only has me. If I go to school he’ll be all by himself and he needs me.”

“Oh,” Bruce said, suddenly feeling quite guilty for his unkind thoughts.

“He gets scared sometimes,” she continued, oblivious to his embarrassment. “He thinks I’ll go away too so I decided to stay home until he feels better.”

“Aren’t you scared?” Bruce asked, finally giving up on trying to figure out why this girl was able to get under his skin so quickly.

Instead of answering, she asked, “Were you scared when your mama died?”

He felt the air leave his lungs and for the first time in a long time he found himself wanting to answer that question. “Yeah. Yeah, I was,” he said in a near whisper, unable to even look at her as he spoke. Shame colored his cheeks and more than anything he wanted to run, run far away from this tiny little tow-headed tot armed only with crayons and big blue eyes that seemed to reach into his soul.

“It’s okay to be scared,” Felicity said as she hopped down from the large chair, oblivious to his shame. She grabbed her picture off the desk. “Here,” she said as she handed it to him.

“Thank you,” he said as he looked down at the surprisingly neat and composed picture. He saw two stick people, one small yellow-haired figure holding the hand of a larger dark-haired one. “Is this you and Lucius?”

“No silly, it’s me and you,” she said pointing to them. “So when you go away you can look at it and you won’t have to be scared anymore because I’ll be there to keep you happy just like with Daddy.”

He looked at her dressed in her bright pink dress with a tulle skirt that poofed out around her like a ballerina’s tutu, her untied sneakers with glitter and stickers on the toes, and into the impossibly large clear blue eyes that were framed by glasses that kept sliding down her nose, and then, despite himself, he asked, “Do you ever get scared, Baby?”

“Of course not!” She said, tilting her head slightly and revealing a gap-toothed grin.

“Why not?” He asked, the corners of his lips tilting upwards despite himself.
“I never got to be scared anymore ’cause you got my picture now.”

“What do you mean?” He asked with a confused frown.

She pointed to it, her little finger nails with the Hello Kitty stickers glittering under the florescent lighting, “This picture means you can’t forget about me. Long as you got it you’ll remember me and always keep me safe because that’s what big boys like you are supposed to do, right?” She smiled brightly into his eyes again.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding his head as he looked down at the picture once again. “Thank you, Baby. For the picture.”

From that moment on, for reasons even he never understood, keeping Felicity Smoak-Fox safe became a priority. As long as she was safe nothing else mattered. The pain, the fear, the loneliness; it all melted away. She and that drawing became a symbol to him that made his journey into becoming Batman bearable. For years he kept the paper folded and safe in his wallet until one day it was gone but the memory was still there. For the first time in his life he’d met someone who saw his fear and didn’t judge him for it or try to talk him out of it; she just accepted it because she understood.

From the moment he’d seen that gap-toothed smile to the first time he’d tasted the lips of the woman she would eventually become, Felicity had been as much a part of the Batman’s armor as his cape and cowl, whether she realized it or not.

Now that it was gone part of him wondered if he’d ever feel safe again.
Chapter Nineteen

Felicity got off the plane late in the afternoon expecting to pick up her bags and stop by the cab kiosk so she could get home to her dad’s place. Without her phone she hadn’t had a chance to call anyone to let them know she was down earlier than expected so she just assumed no one would be waiting for her.

Of course she was wrong.

“Miss Felicity!”

She looked up and smiled at the lined yet beatific face of Alfred Pennyworth, manservant and guardian to Bruce Wayne, aka the World’s Biggest Bat-hole. “Hi Alfred,” she said as she reached up
to hug the much older man’s neck. “I suppose this means Bruce survived the war he started in my house?”

Alfred gave a disapproving cough although she doubted it was directed at her given his tone, “Yes, Master Bruce mentioned that there had been a spot of trouble as he was assisting you in your move back to Gotham.” Alfred offered her his arm and led her through the airport as he spoke. “He called to inform Miss Barbara and myself of your subsequent departure and she was able to trace his credit card and get your arrival information.”

“That reminds me…” Felicity said, digging through her bag with a frown.

“That’s quite alright, Miss,” Alfred said stopping her. “I already collected your bags and had them loaded into the car.”

“Thanks, but that wasn’t what I was looking for.” She fished out Bruce’s card and held it out to him. “I imagine he’ll probably be asking for that back.”

“Not at all, Miss,” Alfred said with just a hint of mischief in his wizened eye. “In fact, Master Bruce informed me of, ahem, the unfortunate circumstances that brought you home so early on a commercial flight,” the last part was said with a hint of disdain. To a great gentleman like Alfred Pennyworth the thought of Bruce allowing a respectable young lady under his care to mingle with the great unwashed in such a way was frightfully distasteful, “and encouraged me to let you know that you are welcome to use the card to replace anything that may have been lost or damaged.”

“Oh, he did, did he?” Felicity asked with a knowing nod.

“Oh yes, Miss,” Alfred said in a composed yet merry tone. “In fact, I took it upon myself to see that you were designated as an authorized user on the account in case you should run into any problems. I thought that perhaps you might like to stop off at one of the department stores near your father’s home before I drop you off. I also took the initiative and arranged for a car and driver to meet you in front of Wayne Towers promptly at nine to take you to Killinger’s Department Store where you will be greeted by a personal shopper that I have engaged for you on Master Bruce’s behalf.”

“Killinger’s, Alfred? Really?” She asked with an evil smirk. Killinger’s, the most exclusive department store in Gotham, it made Neiman Marcus look like Walmart, and if he had engaged a personal shopper then that meant she would be seated in one of the private viewing rooms to watch as models displayed the latest in haute couture. “I’m all for payback but, even for me, that’s pretty mean.”

“I seem to recall Master Bruce saying that he not only engaged in physical combat in your home and in your presence but that he somehow managed to destroy most of your furnishings and the bulk of your clothing.”

“You’re right, he deserves it,” Felicity chuckled and squeezed the older man’s arm affectionately as he led her to Bruce’s town car.

After a quick stop by Bergdorf’s (well, an hour, maybe two) with Alfred acting as her enabler, she managed to marathon shop her way through the women’s department. After spending more money than she earned in the last six months, she was headed up to her dad’s penthouse with no less than three security guards assisting her with her bags. She looked down at the garment bags labeled ‘Armani’ with a particularly fond eye. She’d probably never have a chance to wear them all but Alfred had been especially keen on the idea that she should stock her greatly diminished wardrobe with as many pieces from Bruce’s favorite designer as she possibly could. His exact words were, ‘May the punishment fit the crime.’ Personally she was more of an Oscar de la Renta girl but she was
going to really enjoy all that lovely cashmere after what he’d put her through.

As soon as she got close to the door it swung open and her sister along with Peggy Ann rushed out to greet her with hugs and kisses.

“What took you so long?” The diminutive Asian woman demanded after squeezing her nearly in half. “Barbara called us hours ago and said you were on the way over!”

“You went to Bergdorf’s without me?” Tam said with a moue of disappointment. “Just for that I get to steal anything I that I help unpack!”

“Is dad home?” Felicity asked over the din as they walked into the penthouse.

“Baby!” He heard her dad call out from across the room as Peggy Ann directed the security guards to take her luggage into her old bedroom.

“Daddy!” Felicity said with a huge smile and practically flew into his arms.

“I missed you, Baby,” Lucius said as he enveloped her in a bear hug.

“Daddy, I saw you a few days ago!” She laughed even though she knew exactly what he meant. The minute she stepped into the place she grew up it felt as though she could finally breathe again.

“See? I always knew you were his favorite,” Tam said with a mock pout.

“Get over here!” Lucius ordered Tam as he held open his other arm and enveloped them both in a hug. “I can’t believe that both my girls are back home where they belong!”

“Where’s Mama T?” Felicity asked, looking around. “I figured you or Tam would have called her.”

“Mom’s in Amsterdam at the Hague for that women’s conference and then she has to go to Israel for the International Seminar on Human Trafficking at the MASHAV in Haifa,” Tam told her. “She should be back in time for the Children’s Charity Gala in a couple of weeks though.”

“Well, your mother might not be here but at least I still have my little girls; Peggy Ann!” He called out, releasing them from his embrace but still keeping his hands around them.

“What?” The older woman said walking back into the room, still keeping a sharp eye on the men as they exited the apartment.

“What?” Lucius snorted. “Woman, get over here and stop being so sour already!”

“I’m glad you’re back Baby because your father has been driving me insane!” Peggy stopped in front of them, hands on hips, and scowled. “What do you want now?”

“We’re going out to dinner tonight, all of us, you included!” Lucius shot back. “Get your coat and help pick out a restaurant.”

“No, no, no!” Peggy said, shaking her finger at him. “We’re eating right here! I have a roast chicken in the oven!”

“We can put it aside and have sandwiches later,” Lucius scoffed. “Baby’s home early and that calls for a celebration!”

“You can celebrate at home!” Peggy said sternly. “Baby doesn’t want to eat out, she wants a good home-cooked meal and you’re not supposed to be eating all that bad restaurant food anyway. The
"Doctors!" He snorted. "I’m healthy as a horse!"

"They make glue out of horses your age!" She shot back. "You went off to that awful city of Baby’s and ate nothing but junk while you were gone!"

"I did not," Lucius said, taken aback. "Baby, tell her that—"

"Don’t you make Baby lie for you," Peggy said sternly. "You’re eating my food and that’s the end of it!"

"Just who exactly is in charge here; you or me?" Lucius asked in mock-frustration.

"Peggy Ann’s in charge, Dad. Everyone knows that," came a voice from the foyer.

"Luke?" Felicity turned in surprise to see her brother standing behind her, one arm in a sling and the other clutching a duffel bag.

"Luke!" Her dad said in surprise as they all rushed over to greet him.

"What happened to your arm?" Peggy Ann asked in dismay as he set his duffel on the floor to give her a one-armed hug.

"Oh, this?" Luke said dismissively. "Broke it, no big deal."

"It looks like a little more than a simple break, son," Lucius said worriedly as he took in the bandages and the pins sticking out of his wrist.

"Yeah, well, had to have a little surgery but I should be fine in a couple of more weeks," Luke shrugged nonchalantly. "I figured since Baby was coming home that I might come and visit since I’m pretty much useless back in Tinasha until the pins come out."

"And you didn’t call us and let us know you were hurt?" The small statured elderly woman asked in dismay before reaching up and smacking the much larger man on the back of the head hard enough that the sound echoed off the walls.

"OW!" Luke said, grabbing the back of his head. "Damn!"

"Next time you call home!" She told him sternly. "And I’m making you an appointment so you can have a real doctor look at that arm, you hear me?"

"They have real doctors in Africa," Luke told her, backing up slightly and straightening his spine to his full 6’1” so that he was out of her reach.

"They got witchdoctors who do surgery out of mud huts!" She scoffed. "I watch that Discovery channel! You’re going to see Dr. Schwartz tomorrow."

"Dr. Schwartz is a general practitioner," Luke said with a snort. "We’d need to see an orthopedic surgeon if you’re that worried about my arm."

"Of course he’s a general practitioner! He’s no stupid specialist who only knows how to do one thing; he knows everything about being a doctor! He’s the General of doctors; that’s the best kind of doctor!" Peggy told him in a tone that would brook no arguments about it.

Luke shared a long suffering look with his siblings but no one dared to say a word. They were pretty
sure that Peggy Ann and her theories about medicine are what paid for Dr. Schwartz’s house.

“Wait, how did you know Baby was coming home?” Lucius asked in confusion. “We only found out a few hours ago.”

Luke turned to Tam who had affected a look of pure innocence. “What?” She asked meeting all their stares. “I didn’t call him.”

“Tim called me,” Luke said, grinning at his sister happy to redirect their focus on his older sibling. “He said that Tam told him that I should come home.”

“What?” Tam asked again then heaved a sigh of aggravation. “Tim just happened to be in the room when I was talking to Felicity on the phone and he heard me say how nice it would be if the whole family was together, that’s all. I didn’t tell him to do anything; Tim’s got a mind of his own.”

“Right,” Felicity said, eyeing her sister knowingly. “Like Tim does anything without you telling him first.”

“Wait,” Lucius said, turning first to the large grandfather clock on the wall then to Tam with a scowl. “The flight from the DRC to Gotham is fourteen hours long; what exactly was Bruce’s son doing in your condo at that hour?”

“Um,” Tam leaned back on her heels and offered him a toothy grin, “borrowing a cup of sugar?”

“Sugar, right,” Lucius said disapprovingly. “Just you make sure that boy keeps his fingers out of the sugar bowl while I’m around, understood?”

“Dad!” Tam blushed as both her siblings began snickering loudly.

“Don’t ‘Dad’ me, young lady,” Lucius told her. “Mr. Drake-Wayne and I will be having words! He wants to play house and shack up with my daughter in an apartment I paid for then he’d better man up and state his intentions, you’d best start believing that!”

“Dad, you do know I’m 26 years old and this is the 21st century, right?” Tam asked him dubiously. “I mean no one goes around ‘stating their intentions’ anymore.”

“They do if they want to shack up with one of my girls!” He told her with a thunderous expression.

“Your Daddy is right!” Peggy Ann said, smacking Tam on the back of the head causing her to cry out with a muted ‘Ow’. “He needs to show respect to you and to this house! Your father and I are too old to be raising babies!”

“Babies? Who said anything about babies?” Tam asked, rubbing the back of her head with a wince.

“I know where babies come from!” Peggy said sternly. “Don’t think I don’t!”

“I raised you and Baby to be respectable young ladies and I expect Bruce Wayne’s boy to know better,” Lucius said in solidarity with the elderly woman.

“Daddy,” Tam said with a whine, “I’m a grown up! Besides, I’ve never heard you tell Luke that he had to ‘state his intentions’ to any of the fathers of the hussies he used to hang out with.”


“Luke is a grown man and therefore some other father’s nightmare, you, however, are mine.” Lucius stated with a set to his jaw.

“Luke’s a grown up but I’m not? I’m older than he is!” Tam burst out.

As her sister and father continued to argue with the occasional bit of input by Peggy Ann, Felicity stepped back and slipped her arm around her brother and whispered, “It’s good to be home, huh?”

Luke wrapped his good arm around her and kissed the top of her head, “Sure is. I missed you, kiddo.”

“Me, too.”

The next morning Felicity sat at the breakfast table as she waited for the driver to call up to the penthouse. At first she had balked at the idea of going on such an extravagant spending spree on Bruce’s dime but then she changed her mind. What the hell, she thought, after all she’d gone through that past week she’d earned it. Besides, looking was not the same thing as spending.

Since she was going to be looking at the latest in haute couture and high-end pret-a porter she decided to look the part by dressing in one of the new outfits Bruce had paid for. Although she had rarely worn Armani in the past (the designer’s color palate and severe tailoring didn’t usually appeal to her) the latest collection did have a few bright spots of color and some flirtier pieces that suited her. Today she was wearing a minty juniper colored crepe dress and matching long jacket that ended in a flirty ruffle just above her knees. With it she paired some suede low heeled pumps in nude by the same designer and a Balenciaga clutch she just couldn’t pass up despite the enormous price tag. She’s had about half a second’s worth of guilt about it before saying ‘fuck it’ and snatching that too. Weather in Gotham was much colder than Starling City so she picked up a few coats as well. She planned on pairing her outfit with a cute little cashmere Burberry trench in a shade of ivory that set the pale green of her dress off perfectly.

As she watched her brother murder a huge bowl of cereal, her dad came up behind her and kissed the top of her head. “Good morning Baby. You look awfully dressed up just to go with Peggy Ann to take your brother to the doctor.”

“You didn’t say anything about my outfit, Dad,” Luke garbled around a mouthful of cereal as he indicated the corduroy sports coat, striped navy hoodie, and tan khaki’s he had on.

“You look pretty too, son,” Lucius said as he sat down and opened his paper.

“I’m not going to the doctor, Daddy. Alfred arranged for me to sit in on a private showing at Killinger’s this morning. He said he’d send the car around nine.”

“Mr. Alfred is coming?” Peggy Ann asked, smoothing her hands down her ruffled pink flowered apron before patting her more salt than pepper bob nervously. “You didn’t tell me that he might be coming by this morning.”

Lucius and Luke shot each other grins as Felicity looked over at her foster-grandmother. “I don’t think he’s actually coming himself, he said he’d arrange for one of the staff drivers to take me.”


“Peggy Ann, why don’t you just give it up and ask the man out on a date if you’re interested in him?” Luke asked with a grin.
“Because that’s not how it’s done,” she told him sternly as she swatted him with a napkin. “Here! Stop dribbling milk all over your shirt.”

Luke reached for the napkin and wiped his mouth with it. “I don’t see what the big deal is; girls ask me out all the time.”

“Mr. Alfred is a proper gentleman and proper gentlemen expect ladies to behave in a certain way, that’s why. Humph!” She huffed as she set the bowls of oatmeal from the sideboard in front of Lucius and Felicity. “And don’t compare me to those loose women you go around with. If Mr. Alfred is interested in me then he’ll ask me out in his own time.”


“Bah, oatmeal,” Lucius muttered as he glared at the bowl over his paper. “I’m sick of oatmeal.”

“I like it,” Felicity shrugged as she dug into the warm bowl of homemade gooey brown sugar, raisins, dates, and cinnamon goodness.

“That’s because she at least gave you something to kill the taste,” her dad grumbled as he stared down into the plain bowl of oats. “It wouldn’t kill me to have some eggs and a couple of sausages or even just some sugar and a little pat of butter on this muck every once in a while, you know.”

“The doctor said—“ Peggy began.

“The doctor said, the doctor said—bah!” Lucius said dismissively.

“You’ve got to start watching your health,” Peggy fussed at him as she set the teapot down by his cup. “If I start feeding you eggs and sausages and you keel over dead from a heart attack then what will you say?”

“He won’t say anything; he’ll be dead,” Luke said baldly causing Felicity to snort with laughter beside him.

“You hush, you bad boy!” Peggy fussed at him. The doorbell sounded and Peggy brushed her hands down her apron. “Eat!” She ordered a grumbling Lucius as she went to answer the door.

“That’s my ride,” Felicity said as she took one last sip of her juice before getting up from the table and hurrying out of the kitchen.

“Luke,” her dad whispered causing the other man to look up. He pointed to Felicity’s abandoned bowl and held out his own in exchange. “Pass it over.”

“Oh uh,” Luke said getting up from the table to follow his sister. “You’re not getting me in trouble, no way.”

“Damn it,” Lucius grumbled as he shoveled a spoonful of the plain oats into his mouth. “Bah!” He said before getting back to his paper.

Felicity and Luke made it to the foyer just in time to see a flustered Peggy Ann open the door to invite Alfred inside.

“Oh, Mr. Alfred,” Peggy Ann said in a sweetly accented tone. “We weren’t expecting you. Forgive my appearance, I was just fixing the family breakfast.”
“Not at all, Mrs. Hu, you look very lovely today,” he said as he bent slightly at the waist and kissed the air above her hand gallantly.

“Oh my,” she blushed in a way that made her look twenty years younger. “And please Mr. Alfred, as I’ve told you before just call me Peggy Ann.”

Luke looked down at the floor and snorted as Felicity elbowed him warningly. “Alfred! I didn’t think you were coming.”

Alfred cleared his throat and straightened his posture. “Yes, I was planning on arranging for one of the drivers with the car service your father uses to escort you, but since Master Bruce is in meetings for the rest of the day I thought you wouldn’t mind if I saw to it personally.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” she objected. “I’m sure you have better things to do with your day. Besides, I could have just gotten a cab or something.”

“Nonsense,” Alfred said, waving her off. “I volunteered, and besides,” he looked at Peggy Ann with a twinkle in his eye, “it gave me an opportunity to check in with Mrs. Hu, forgive me, Ms. Peggy Ann.”

“Oh Mr. Alfred,” Peggy Ann giggled girlishly as Luke continued to snicker in the background.

Felicity just rolled her eyes and grabbed her jacket and bag. “I’m ready then, after you.”

“Madam,” Alfred said, tipping his hat to the other woman before offering Felicity his elbow as he escorted her to the elevator.

“When are you going to just ask her out already?” Felicity asked him as soon as the elevator doors closed.

“Pardon?” Alfred asked with feigned confusion.

“What is it with you hero types and your inability to make things easy on the women in your lives,” Felicity muttered.

“Master Bruce is the hero, not me. Besides, between caring for the Manor and assisting in Master Bruce’s extracurricular activities, I haven’t the time for anything else.”

“I’ve heard that before,” she snorted as the doors opened to the lobby and he led her out to the limousine that was parked just outside. He held the door for her and she stopped, catching his sleeve before stepping inside. “Seriously, why are you taking me today when you could have had one of the staff drivers take me shopping or I could have just caught a cab?”

Alfred stepped close and spoke into her ear quietly, “Master Bruce and your Mr. Queen are concerned that you may be in some danger so they requested you not be left alone until they can further assess the situation. Master Bruce asked that I handle your security this morning personally.”

“You do know that I’m a big girl and I can handle myself, right?” She asked him wryly. “Besides the threat was canceled ages ago and anything else that might be after me is 3000 miles away in Starling City.”

“Of course, Miss,” Alfred said cordially as he assisted her into the back of the car. “However if it keeps Master Bruce happy it is my pleasure to do so. Also it gives us the opportunity to enjoy this lovely day together, does it not?”
Felicity waited until Alfred slipped behind the wheel to speak. “I’ll say one thing for you, Mr. Pennyworth. You certainly do have style.”

“Indeed, Miss.”

Felicity was not a vain woman. She liked clothes, yes, but she wasn’t caught up in the whole fashionista heiress thing despite what Oliver had said when he saw her ‘closet’. She just liked quality and if she was going to spend money on clothes she liked knowing that she looked good in them.

And then she was introduced to the world of private showrooms and personal shoppers.

It was like fashion Disneyland.

They weren’t clothes, they were works of art. After a brief ‘interview’ where she was measured and asked to describe her personal style, Felicity was handed a glass filled with champagne and orange juice (the breakfast of champions) and seated in a comfy chair while women matching her general body type swept through the room wearing clothes that looked like they were made just for her. From artfully torn jeans to fabulous couture gowns, they swirled around her with big toothy smiles in a sea of color.

For the first half hour or so, Felicity’s inner cheapskate wanted to run as far and fast as she could to the nearest outlet store. Even though it was Bruce’s money paying for everything the mere fact that no one was mentioning how much anything actually cost was nerve wracking. She held out as long as she could but then the very nice lady who was helping her (and who worked on commission) would refill her glass and she’d see an elegantly draped bit of silk or a scrap of lace that was just too lovely to say no to and the word ‘yes’ would just appear out of midair. In fact, as the hours passed she forgot the word ‘no’ altogether.

Not that she was a pig about it, she told herself. As lovely as most of the couture gowns were she limited her purchases to only a chosen few. She knew she’d have a need for evening wear as long as she was in Gotham so she picked out some beautifully styled gowns that emphasized her figure while still appearing relatively conservative; her favorites being two gowns by Monique Lhuillier, a designer she dearly loved but rarely wore due to her strict budgeting.

Most of her purchases were selected from the ‘ready to wear’ designer collections. She managed to find quite a few pieces from several different designers (some she’d never worn before because she could never afford them on her budget) along with delicate looking lingerie and foundation garments, shoes, handbags, jewelry, and accessories.

Every time she said ‘yes’ to another bright and beautiful dress the woman directing the action made sure her Mimosa was topped off. By lunch time she wasn’t sure if she was tipsy on champagne or on a shop-a-holic high. She didn’t even want to know how much she spent by the end of the day, merely handing the personal shopper Bruce’s card and letting her take care of the details. The gowns and some of the jackets and things had to be altered due to her petite frame but the rest she scheduled to be delivered to her dad’s place.

As she left the private showroom a dark haired woman stopped her, “Excuse me, but aren’t you Felicity Smoak?”

“Yes, do I know you?” Felicity asked as she examined the woman’s face and tried to place her but couldn’t. If she had to choose two words to describe her, the first would be ‘exotic’ and the second would be ‘gorgeous’. With her inky black hair, dark heavily lashed eyes, delicate features, and
bronzed complexion the woman in question was certainly unforgettable.

“No, but we do have some mutual acquaintances.” She handed her a card.

Felicity looked at the black card with the raised red lettering and the holographic ‘S’ curiously. She flipped it over, “Miranda Tate, CEO.” She looked up at her with a raised eyebrow. “You’re with Stellmoor International.”

“Yes, but I promise I’m not stalking you or anything,” Miranda laughed attractively. “Believe me, I’m just as surprised to see you as you probably are to see me. I’m just here for the new Dolce & Gabbana line. I saw it in Paris, of course, but what you see on the runway is never quite the same as what makes it to the stores.”

“No, of course,” Felicity said, suddenly feeling a bit exposed. She tried to hide her discomfort with a polite smile. “I bought a few pieces from their collection myself.”

“I saw that,” Miranda nodded. “The yellow A-line dress with the kimono and the beading?” Felicity nodded in mild surprise. “Yes, I thought it was adorable but, unfortunately, it’s just not my color,” she made a growly sound of disappointment and smiled so brightly that Felicity was temporarily blinded it. “Yellow has a bad habit of making me look green around the gills. Oh well.”

“I can’t believe you’d ever look bad in anything, you’re freaking gorgeous,” Felicity said then cringed. “Sorry! One too many Mimosas. Just ignore me, please!”

Miranda laughed, a high and tinkling sound that suited her. “No, it’s fine. Thanks, actually. After all the drudgery of going from meeting to meeting while trying to shake off jet lag, I’m glad someone thinks I still clean up nice.” She tilted her head and smiled at her curiously, “You know, since we’re both here, would you like to get some coffee or something?”

“I would, but I’m with someone,” Felicity’s eyes scanned the crowd behind Miranda until she spotted Alfred who had been examining a selection of umbrellas. She waved and the older man nodded and started toward them. “Rain check?”

“Of course,” Miranda said easily, seemingly unperturbed by given the brush-off. “Call me sometime and we’ll do lunch.”

“Sure, thanks. Nice meeting you,” she said, putting the card in her purse before setting off toward Alfred.

“You, too,” she said before heading off towards the escalators.

As soon as she approached Alfred he took her by the elbow and frowned as he watched the other woman fade into the crowd. “Who was that woman who was talking to you?” He asked quietly.

“Business contact,” she answered him. “Just someone I met briefly back in Starling City. She happened to recognize me and asked me out for coffee but I told her I already had plans.”

Alfred nodded, seemingly satisfied, and they continued on their way. She felt a moment’s worth of guilt for lying to the older man but she knew if she told him that she was from Stellmoor and why they were trying to hire her he’d go to Bruce and then she’d be lucky to ever see the light of day again. Bruce would overreact and have her under lock and key so fast her head would spin. Besides, there was no way they could have known she’d be here, Felicity argued to herself silently. Even she didn’t know she’d be here yesterday. Maybe it was really just a coincidence after all. Gotham was a big city but Killinger’s catered to a very affluent clientele and it would be quite easy to imagine running into someone like Miranda Tate here. She decided to forget the whole thing and just enjoy
the rest of her day instead.

Afterwards she and Alfred had a long and pleasant lunch at Jean Georges where he insisted they order the tasting menu (on Bruce of course). The elegant atmosphere, the delicious food, and the pleasant company went a long way towards making her feel a lot better than she had in a long time. By the time they were done they were both stuffed and Alfred had managed to charm the recipe for the Parmesan Risotto and Caramelized Beef Tenderloin from the chef, promising to recreate it for her the next time she stopped by the manor.

He offered to continue their day with more shopping or a visit to one of the local galleries but her feet were positively aching by then. Marathon shopping was always best done in sneakers, not heels. Promising to do this with him again someday soon (specifically the next time Bruce needed a kick in the ass), she had him drop her by Wayne Enterprises so that she could stop and see her sister to make plans for the evening. After assuring him she would get a ride home with Tam, Felicity headed upstairs to her office.

“Felicity!” Ellen, Tam’s PA greeted her with a wide smile as she got off the elevator. “I didn’t know you had gotten back. Are you here for just a visit or are you back permanently?”

“Haven’t decided yet,” she hedged. “Is Tam in?”

“She’s just in a meeting with the other department heads and then she’ll be right out. If you like you can wait out here for her.” Ellen said, indicating one of the plush leather couches in the reception area. “Do you want anything? I was just heading out to make a quick coffee run for Tam.”

“That would be great. Latte?” She asked.

“Sure thing,” Ellen grinned.

Felicity sat on the couch and picked up a magazine, thumbing through it half-heartedly. She looked around the elegant offices and felt a twinge of homesickness all of the sudden. If she were back in Starling she’d be busy at her desk or ordering a late lunch for her, Oliver, and Diggle to eat in his office as they strategized for that evening’s activities. Today was fun and all but this wasn’t the kind of life she’d ever envisioned for herself. She wanted more out of life than marathon shopping and hanging with the ladies (and British gentlemen) who lunch set. She really needed to get back to work and soon.

“Felicity.”

She looked up to see Bruce standing across from her. She put down her magazine and stood to greet him so that his height advantage wasn’t so overwhelming, “Bruce.” Her eyes skimmed his face taking note of the slight swelling and darkening along his jawline and the small cut above his eyebrow, the only outward signs of his and Oliver’s clash from the day before.

“How was your flight?” He asked quietly, his hands shoved awkwardly in his pockets.

“Fine,” she said. “How’s your face?”

He reached up and rubbed his jaw with a slight grimace. “Sore.”

“Can’t exactly say I’m sorry about that,” she returned coolly.

“Felicity, about what happened yesterday, I—“

“Hey girl!” Tam greeted as she walked up to them both. “Bruce,” she said in a far less friendly tone
as she arched a perfectly groomed eyebrow in his direction.

“Tam,” Bruce greeted, clearing his throat slightly. “I’ll talk to you later,” he said nodding at Felicity before heading off to the elevators.

Tam watched as he made his escape, her full lips pursed in thought, “I know that he can be an ass but, damn.” She looked over at her sister with a saucy wink. “Baby, you have got to start giving me details because that man has my imagination racing with the way he wears those suits of his.”

“Yeah,” Felicity agreed with a sigh. “I wish I could tell you it was just good tailoring but the truth is that the man could be wearing nothing but a wet paper sack and he’d still look good.”

“Ooh, wet Bruce Wayne,” Tam seemed to ponder that for a moment. And then another moment.

“Tam?” Felicity said trying to get her attention as the seconds began to tick by.

“Hush, I’m still thinking.” She said, waving her off.

“You’re impossible,” Felicity snorted. “What about Tim?”

“What about him?” Tam asked, brushing a lock of her artfully styled and highlighted dark caramel colored hair behind her ear. “First of all thinking isn’t cheating and secondly, Tim and I are officially unofficial.”

“You’re practically living together,” she pointed out.

“He happens to sleep over every once in a while, that’s all,” Tam dodged.

“How often is ‘every once in a while’?”

“Oh shut up,” Tam said, sticking her tongue out. She then took Felicity by the arm and led her to her office. As soon as the door closed behind them she pounced, “Okay Baby, now spill.”

“What?” Felicity asked innocently.

“Oh no, you don’t get to play that game with me. When I came up you and Bruce were talking like something happened between the two of you yesterday and I want all the sexy details,” she demanded playfully.

“There are no sexy details,” she huffed as she flopped down on one of the chairs across from her sister’s glass and chrome desk. She looked out of the large bank of windows that had gorgeous views of the Gotham skyline. “Nice office.”

“You’ve seen it before so stop hedging and get to talking,” Tam demanded.

“First you get to tell me why you called Luke,” Felicity said fixing her sister with a stern look.

“I didn’t,” Tam said innocently.

“You told Tim to call and you know it, my question is why? And another thing, calling our brother because Bruce is picking on me? Seriously?” Felicity asked dryly. “This isn’t kindergarten and no one is after my lunch money, Tamara.”

“I just thought Luke could talk to him, that’s all,” Tam shrugged, avoiding her eyes.

“And what was he going to do if talking didn’t work? Beat Bruce up for breaking his little sister’s
“heart?” She asked sarcastically.

“You said he put his hands on you, okay? It pissed me off,” Tam said defiantly.

“He wasn’t trying to hurt me, Tam,” Felicity flushed. “It was…in the heat of the moment.”

“I don’t care! At the time I was angry and I hadn’t had my coffee yet so I acted, sue me. Besides, no man ever has the right to put his hands on you and you know it,” Tam shot back. “There is no excuse for it, period.”

“Look, Bruce is not on my list of favorite people right now and I know it sounds bad but he would never hurt me; not like that, and not on purpose. After it happened he apologized,” Felicity sighed. “He’s not a monster, he was just excited and he left a couple of bruises on my shoulder.”

“So said every victim of domestic abuse, ever,” Tam said with a scowl.

Felicity laughed, “Tam! I’m not a victim of ‘domestic abuse’, I swear!”

“Yeah, well, you might be right but he still needs his ass kicked,” Tam said stubbornly, crossing her arms over her chest. “I mean, who has sex with someone and then dumps them immediately afterwards twice? That was a shitty, shitty thing to do and he must be squished like a bug and taught the error of his ways. No one fucks with the Fox Sisters and gets away with it.”


“Why not? Luke can handle himself in a fight. He took all those martial arts classes and did that kickboxing stuff,” Tam said in a strangely furtive manner.

“What aren’t you telling me, Tam?” Felicity asked suspiciously.

Tam made a sound of dismay and clutched her chest protectively, “Moi? Hide something from my baby sister? Never!”

“You are so full of—“

“Hi, sorry to interrupt but I have your coffees,” Ellen said from the door as she carried in two large paper cups with the Wayne Enterprises logo on them.

“Thanks,” Tam said, taking the coffees from her assistant before practically shoving her out the door. “Now go away and hold all my calls!”

“B-but you have a meeting—“ Ellen stuttered and Felicity got up to follow her out, snatching her latte from Tam along the way.

“That’s okay,” Felicity said as she slipped outside. “Come over tonight and we’ll talk, okay?”

“But…aw,” Tam said before stomping her feet with a pout. “That’s not fair!”

“Tough,” she said, raising her latte and giving Ellen a grateful smile. She waved at her sister as she headed to the elevators. “Call me!”

“You don’t have your phone,” Tam protested from the door to her office.

“Oh yeah, right,” Felicity said with a tilt of her head before slipping into the elevator just before the doors closed.
Felicity chuckled as she sipped her coffee appreciatively on the way down to the lobby. From the corner of her eye she spotted a familiar face in a well-tailored suit talking to some of the uniformed security guards. “Hey Paul,” she said walking up to the security desk.

“Baby! I heard you were back,” the older man said with a wide grin. “Are you here for a visit or back to stay?”

“Haven’t quite decided yet,” she said, wondering how many more times she’d have to answer that particular question before the week was out.

“Wait a minute,” he said, holding her shoulder gently and waving over a few of the security personnel she didn’t recognize. As they neared he introduced her. “Boys, this is Miss Felicity Fox, Mr. Fox’s other daughter. Baby here used to come in with her daddy when she was just a tiny little bit of fluff and bring me cookies so I would take her into the security office. She used to love looking at all the computers and closed circuit surveillance equipment so much you’d have thought she was riding the elephants at the circus. You were always such a bright, inquisitive little thing,” he said, hugging her shoulder one-handed.

Oh, how little times have changed, Felicity thought to herself.

“Baby, this is David Fisk, Marvin Daily, and Jake Simmons. Fisk and Daily are with building security and Jake acts as your Dad’s daytime driver and private security when he’s in Gotham.” He waited until each man greeted her with a muted ‘Ma’am’ before continuing.

“Hi,” she said to all of them before turning to Paul. “What happened to Zeke and Mr. Monroe?”

“Old Zeke retired to Florida to be near his daughter about six months ago and Mr. Monroe had back surgery so he decided to take a leave of absence.” He turned to the younger man again. “Trust me, though; your Dad’s in good hands with Jake.”

“I’m sure he is,” Felicity said giving the man another smile before speaking again to Paul. “Paul, I lost my phone and Tam and Dad are in meetings. Would you mind calling me a cab?”

“No need for that, Jake can take you, right?” He asked, meeting the tall blond man’s deep brown eyes inquisitively.

“Certainly, ma’am,” Jake said with an easy grin. “Your dad won’t need me for at least another hour or so. Where did you need to go?”

“Just home, thanks,” she told him, returning his smile. “Are you sure I’m not taking you from something more important? I mean, a cab will do.”

“It’s fine, ma’am. Besides, I imagine that if you’re going to be staying here awhile Mr. DioGuardi will be assigning you your own security detail soon enough.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” she said quickly.

“No, Jake’s right, Baby,” Paul told her. “I’ll get with your dad today and talk over the logistics with him. Until then I’ll have Jake take you where you need to go and assign your dad another driver until we get you sorted.”

“Paul, no offense to Mr. Simmons, but I didn’t have a security detail before I left Gotham and I didn’t have one in Starling either. It’s really not necessary, I promise.”

“Times change, Baby,” Paul said, his features darkening slightly. “Gotham has gotten even more
dangerous since you’ve been gone, if you can believe it. There have been a few threats against the company and your father personally.”

“Against Dad?” Felicity asked with a frown. “No one said anything to me about that.”

“He probably didn’t want to worry you but there has been an increase in crime and it’s better to be safe than sorry,” Paul said easily.

“Ask me it’s that Batman character’s fault,” the man Paul introduced as ‘David Fisk’ said harshly. “He’s the one who brought all those masked freaks into the city in the first place.”

Paul eyed the man sharply, “No one asked you, Fisk. Maybe you should get upstairs and go back over those reports again.”

“Yes, sir. Excuse me sir, ma’am,” Fisk said, all but snapping a salute as he and the other one, Daily, walked away.


“Aren’t you a former Marine?” Felicity asked with a half-smile although Fisk’s comments did put her off somewhat. Even though she knew the Batman and his crew operated under the cover of night for a reason it still bothered her when people dismissed all the sacrifices they had made only to lump them together with the very criminals they stopped on a daily basis.

“There’s a difference between a hard charger like me and a couple of ‘Semper, I’ blue falcons like Fisk and Daily,” Paul huffed. “Those particular Jarheads are just a couple of hotheads if you ask me. Less than six-months out and it’s like they’re back on the block. I keep having to break it down Barney style for ‘em! First chance I get, those two are getting shipped off and out of my hair. Now Jake here,” he slapped the other man on the shoulder, “He’s what you call a good piece of gear. He knows how to think things through while those guys would just storm in and blow shi—er, stuff up.” He cleared his throat and gave her a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. “It was nice seeing you, Baby. Jake will take you wherever you need to go and I’ll tell your dad, okay?”

“Paul, I’m really not interested in a security detail,” she told him one last time. “Tam doesn’t have one, does she?”

Paul looked at her in consternation, “No, but not for lack of trying on my part.” He smiled slightly and winked at her, “Oh hell Baby, as far as me and your dad are concerned both you girls are too pretty to be set out on the streets of Gotham on your own.” He sighed, “You sure you want to turn it down?”

“I’m sure,” she said firmly. “I can take care of myself.”

“Baby, you’re making me old before my time,” Paul grumbled good naturedly. “Fine, I’ll let your dad know. Still, at least for today, take Jake with you, alright?”

“Thanks Paul,” Felicity said offering him a bright smile as Jake led her out.

“Come by sometime and see me,” he said as he waved goodbye. “Bring some of Peggy Ann’s cookies and I might even let you in the security office for old time’s sake.”

“I figured we could take the Mercedes instead of the limo,” Jake said as he opened the door for her and made sure she was safely seated inside before going around and slipping into the driver’s seat. “Your dad likes to use the limo so he can spread out his paperwork between meetings.”
“This is fine,” she said easily as she leaned back into the supple leather. “I’m not picky. Back in Starling City I usually just drove around in a Mini.”

“Cooper, huh?” Jake nodded while keeping his eyes on traffic. “Nice cars but a little cramped for me.”

“I’ve heard that before,” she chuckled. “I noticed you have an accent; where are you from?”

“Oh, so I take it I don’t sound like a Gotham City boy to you then?” He chuckled, allowing his drawl to deepen in response. “I’m originally from Mississippi, ma’am. I was in the Rangers until I completed my last tour and got a job with Wayne Security.”

“I had a friend who was with the Rangers back in Starling City; Sergeant Major John Diggle out of Afghanistan.”

“Airborne or Special Forces?” He asked.

“Special Forces, you?”

“Airborne, ma’am. 75th regiment. I served in Afghanistan myself. Do you know what company your friend was with? We might have crossed paths and not known it.”

“I’m not sure but he mentioned the Blackhawks.”

Jake’s eyes flicked upward to the rearview mirror in surprise. “Under Colonel Ted Gaynor, ma’am?”

“I think so, why?” Felicity asked curiously.

“Um, it’s just that the Blackhawks were legendary. How many tours did Sergeant Major Diggle serve for?”

“Three.”

Jake cleared his throat and shifted in his seat, “That’s, um, okay. Wow, your friend must be a pretty tough guy.”

“He doesn’t talk about it much, but yeah, he’s pretty tough,” she agreed. “If you were Airborne why are you driving my dad around Gotham and not flying a helicopter or something?”

“I manage to get up in a bird every once in a while,” Jake said easily. “When they hired me they wanted someone who could handle security in the air as well as on the ground. If your dad needs me to I can handle a stick on a bird or hop in the cockpit just as easily as I can thread a limo through midtown traffic during rush hour.”

“Wow, I feel honored having you around to act as my personal on-call hero then,” Felicity teased with a tongue touched smile.

The blond man grinned back at her sheepishly as a slight flush colored his cheeks. He cleared his throat as they pulled up to the front of Wayne Towers. “Here we are, Ma’am. Stay there and I’ll get your door for you.”

Jake walked around to her side and offered her his hand as he helped her out of the car. “Thank you,” she said as soon as she was on her feet. “And please, call me Felicity. I insist.”

“Felicity,” he repeated, his smile making his handsome features all the more attractive. “It suits you, but then again so does ‘Baby’.” He teased then apologized as he noticed her cheeks go bright pink.
His deep chocolate eyes filled with regret, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you it’s just that me being a Southern boy I’m a bit used to young ladies being called by that particular nickname.”

“Yeah, my dad is from the South, as well.” Felicity said sheepishly. “It’s not entirely his fault though; my sister started calling me ‘Baby’ originally, he just made sure it stuck.”

“Pretty blue eyes like yours, I can see why,” he said teasingly in his honeyed whiskey drawl and grinned as she blushed again. “Here,” he said as he handed her a card. “I know what you told Mr. DioGuardi but, just in case you ever need an ‘on-call hero’ again,” she smiled and he winked at her, “you can just call me and I’ll come pick you up.”

“Thanks Jake,” she said, taking his card.

“And, um, if you find yourself needing company while you’re here visiting I don’t clean up half bad,” Jake said brushing his nails on the lapel of his jacket and blowing on them jokingly. “I reckon you know Gotham better than I do, being a native and all, but I might be able to reintroduce you to a few spots you might have forgotten.”

“Why Mr. Simmons, are you flirting with the boss’s daughter?” Felicity teased back.

“Could be,” he said with a shrug, then fixed her with a slightly more serious eye. “That is if you’re okay with it.”

“I’m okay with it,” Felicity said, feeling her Mimosa induced courage one more time before it completely left her bloodstream. “I’ll see you around Jake Simmons.”

“My pleasure, Miss Felicity. You have yourself a good night now,” he said with one last grin before slipping back behind the driver’s seat and heading off.

Felicity looked down at the card in her hand and smiled happily. Nothing like being flirted with by a good looking guy to give you a bit of an ego boost, she thought. She headed upstairs with a bit more of a spring to her step, her problems melting away. At least for the moment.
Chapter Twenty

After work Oliver immediately drove to Orchid Bay to confront Walter at his home in the Mayor’s Mansion. He understood Dig’s apprehension about him doing this. Walter was one of the last links his sister had to their mother, not to mention the fact that Walter was a friend of the Arrow and had saved their asses on more than one occasion either by bailing him out financially or by offering them political clout in order to keep the mission going. To be honest, he hoped Walter wasn’t part of this mess himself, but he had to know for sure. After that, he had no idea what he’d do.

It took him a long time to get over the deep feeling of betrayal he’d felt the first time he’d learned of his sister’s true parentage over two years ago. After months of giving his mother the cold shoulder, after almost hating her, they’d reconciled over her kidnapping and recovery. Then came that terrible night when Roy had a psychotic episode that had nearly killed all of them and his mother had been murdered by Slade. Their team, as well as his family, had taken several hits that day. Sara left him because she needed time to battle her demons in peace after trying to kill Roy, Roy was in a coma, Moira was dead, and Thea was a wreck. When Roy had finally stabilized it hadn’t gone well. Roy resented him, Thea was angry at both him and Roy and still grieving for their mother, and he was dealing with the fact that his mother’s lies ran deeper than any of them could have imagined when he found out that not only was Merlyn still alive and that she had known, but that she had paid the girl he had gotten pregnant when he was eighteen to go away and to lie about the miscarriage.

He sighed and raked his fingers through his dark blond hair. He lost her for a while after that. Not only couldn’t she forgive him for not taking out Slade the year before, she didn’t understand how he could walk away from his own child. That had been...hard. As much as he wanted to be a father to his son, he knew he would always be a target. He and Sandra agreed that it would be for the best if Oliver stayed away and that they go into Waller’s Witness Protection Program. He had a man in his life, one who wanted to adopt him, so Oliver signed away his parental rights with the understanding that if Connor needed him, or ever wanted to know him, he’d be available.

It wasn’t great, but it was the best he could do for him. In the end, it was Felicity who managed to get through to her. To this day he didn’t know what she did or said to bring her back, but it worked. He’d finished off two bottles of vodka and was working his way through a fifth of scotch when Felicity showed up with Thea close behind. They held him in their arms, and they cried it out together. Somehow, even after all they’d been through, she forgave him and they both forgave their mother with Felicity between them as the glue holding them together.
Making things right with Roy had taken even longer, the younger man only rejoining their team again after being on his own for almost a year. Again, that was Felicity. She’s the one who talked him into coming back, she got Sara and Roy together to talk it out, and she convinced him to give Thea the space she needed to mend her relationship with him even if it was a work in progress.

Felicity.

He tightened his hands on the steering wheel. It was all coming back together; just a few days ago everything was right in the world, his family was on solid ground, his business was succeeding and Felicity…

He could still taste her. He could still remember the noises she made when he held her, the look of wonder in her eyes when he brought her to orgasm. Sex was something he’d always enjoyed but never really wasted emotions on. It was an act, a fun act, but just a physical coupling of one body into another. At one point in his life fucking was as impersonal as a firm handshake. It hadn’t been like that with her and now she was gone because of Isabel and his mother—

His fists clenched again causing the leather on the steering wheel to squeal in protest as he gnashed his teeth together. She had never warmed up to Felicity even after they reconciled as mother and son. Felicity never said anything either before or after Moira’s death but he could always tell when she’d had contact with his mother from the expression on her face. Even two years later whenever Thea would mention their mother in front of her Felicity would shift uncomfortably and not say anything. He knew his mother was capable of a lot but if she had killed her…

He parked in front of the mansion and rested his head on the steering wheel as he shut his eyes. Felicity had been there from the very beginning, fixing all of them, making things better, saving them all, and how did he repay her? By sleeping with her then sending her away.

That had been a dick move on his part; it had been an Ollie move. She said she’d never met Ollie but she had that day. What’s worse is that he sent her away with him, that son of a bitch Wayne. He snorted. What right did he have to be jealous though? How could he possibly give her the life she deserved when he couldn’t even do that for Thea, or Connor, or anyone else for that matter? No, she was better off in Gotham even if it meant being with that bastard. It didn’t mean he had to like it, it just meant he had to endure it.

He might never be the man she thought he could be, he might never be able to be the man he wanted to be for her, but he could at least try to keep her safe even if that meant burying his mother and the last of her secrets once and for all.

He turned off the ignition and walked up to the mansion where he was greeted by a member of the house staff and immediately shown to Walter’s private study. The older man was on the phone and from the side of the conversation he could hear it he was probably talking to Mark Francis about the upcoming election against a corrupt financier by the name of John Deleon.

Deleon was crooked but he was also slick as goose shit, a true politician. Not surprising, he thought grimly. After all, what was politics but controlled manipulation and Deleon was a master at it. It was fairly obvious that he was dirty and had been accused of everything from laundering money for the mob to having connections to several drug kingpins but nothing ever stuck. Despite his less than stellar reputation, he was using every dirty trick he could to give Walter a hell even though the other man was still managing to pull ahead in the polls. If he had to take down Walter it would open up a whole other can of worms but it had to be done. If he was a part of this, he had to know.

He looked up in surprise as he glanced up from his call. “Mark, hold on a minute, will you? Oliver just walked in.” He placed his hand over the receiver and turned to him, “I’ll just be another minute
and then we can talk.”

“No problem,” Oliver said with a hint of grim determination in his tone despite his casual cadence. “I just need to know if you hired a hitman to take out Felicity or if it was my mother who made the call instead.”

Shock flashed across the other man’s features and his grip loosened on the phone. He could hear Mark’s panicked voice demanding to know what the hell he was talking about. Walter quickly placed the phone up to his ear and adopted a smooth tone of feigned amusement, “He was just kidding, Mark; you know Oliver. Yes, I know. Mark, stop panicking; nothing is wrong. Yes, I’m sure. Now, if you don’t mind, I need to talk a little business with my step-son. Okay, I’ll call you tomorrow. Bye.” He put the phone back on its cradle and hurried to the office door to close it before giving Oliver a look of righteous indignation, “What on Earth were you thinking? You’re just lucky it was Mark on the other end of the phone and not a member of the press! If a member of the news corps ever got ahold of a sound byte like that it could ruin all of us!”

“Frankly Walter, I’m beyond giving a shit at this point,” he said tightly.

“Well, you should!” He told him forcefully. “Besides the company and your own future political career, you need to think of how a rumor like that would affect Thea! We’ve had to endure and survive a hell of a lot since your mother’s death, much of it her fault, but she would never try to kill anyone and the last thing we need is to have her name or ours further muddied in the press!”

“I don’t have a political career, Walter; not now and certainly not in the future.”

Walter’s features softened and he huffed out a breath even as Oliver looked on angrily, “Son, you’re not only a Queen but a Dearden and public service is part of your legacy.”

“Just because my grandfather was governor doesn’t mean that I’m ever going to run for office,” he said irritably.

“Not just your grandfather,” Walter pointed out. “Your great-grandfather was a senator, his brother was a congressman; the Dearden’s have been political royalty for generations and you’re just beginning to come into your own. By the time John Dearden was your age he was already campaigning to become lieutenant governor and within four years he was the governor of this state and maintained that office proudly until he ran for president. Had he not been killed in that plane crash during the campaign he would have won. And let’s not forget your mother—”

Oliver cut him off, “First off, I’ve heard this speech my entire life; there’s no need to rehash it now. Secondly, did you or my mother hire a contractor to take out Felicity after she told you both that Malcolm Merlyn was Thea’s biological father?”

Walter scowled at him, “You’re damn lucky I had this office swept for bugs this afternoon. We found three bugs in my office at City hall and several more at our campaign headquarters.”

“Your problem with Deleon and his dirty tricks will have to wait, Walter. Right now I need to know the truth,” he said firmly.

“Your mother was capable of a lot of things, Oliver, but murder wasn’t one of them,” he said firmly.

“Are you sure?” Oliver asked with a steady look. “She conspired with Merlyn, lied to us about Thea her entire life, hid my son from me, had you kidnapped—honestly I have to wonder if she didn’t have anything to do with the Queen’s Gambit going down in the first place much less that she put a hit on my assistant.”
“Your mother loved you,” Walter said steadily, his eyes beginning to burn with anger as well. “Yes, she made bad decisions and was way over her head because of it, but she would never hurt you deliberately. Every lie she ever told was to protect her family. She tried to hide the truth from Thea to protect you both, she lied to you about Connor to protect your future, she had me kidnapped to protect me from Merlyn—”

“At what point do we stop making excuses for everything she ever did to us?” Oliver burst out. “At what point do we stop trying to turn her into some goddamn plaster saint of charity and motherhood and call her out for what she was; a monster?”

Walter took two steps towards him, his fists clenched at his sides, and bit out, “Moira Queen was not a monster! She was your mother and she loved you! She was human, she made mistakes,” he ran a shaky hand over his bald pate and stalked towards the mini bar near the bookshelves and poured himself two generous fingers of scotch. He took a drink to steady himself before turning back to Oliver. He placed the rock glass down deliberately before speaking, “I left your mother because of her secrets, so I know better than anyone how you’re feeling right now. I wouldn’t reconcile with her when she asked because I couldn’t trust her anymore. Despite that, I know in my heart that your mother would never try to hurt you or me by going after Felicity like that.”

“And what about you, Walter?” Oliver asked coldly as he approached the man again. “Felicity said she went to you with that information before she went to my mother. You had a lot to lose if that information got out.”

“I would never--!” Walter’s mouth tightened into a grim line as he finally lost his temper. It took him several seconds to get his emotions under control before he could speak again, “Do you even know what Felicity means to me?”

“No, not really,” Oliver said, unimpressed by his outburst.

“I've known Felicity since she was a baby, Oliver,” he told him, his gaze clear and direct. “If Moira had tried to hurt that girl I would have turned her into the police myself. At the very least, I would have tried to stop her.”

He narrowed his eyes at the other man, “You’ve known Felicity that long?”

“Yes,” he bit out. “Lucius Fox was my friend, the best friend I ever had other than your father. He was my mentor, my teacher, and I respect him more than any other person on this Earth. When Felicity’s mother died, he practically kept that girl by his side 24/7. She went everywhere with him. He even kept her in his office while he was working. If she wasn’t at school, she was with Lucius and I watched that little girl grow up. I would never hurt Felicity, Oliver. Never!”

“So you knew all about Felicity’s past and you never told me?” Oliver asked, feeling a new kind of betrayal.

“Felicity didn’t want anyone to know about her association with the Fox name,” he said in a much calmer tone as he began to relax again. “She didn’t want to be shown any type of favoritism or have her presence within the company seen as a conflict of interest. Not that it would have been; Lucius kept her shares in Wayne Enterprises in a blind trust so she could work anywhere she wanted to without any sort of legal issues cropping up,” he added.

“So that’s why you hired her?” He asked, “Because of her father?”

“No, not at all,” he said quickly. “I hadn’t seen Felicity since she was ten years old and, other than the occasional business venture between QC and one of Wayne’s subsidiaries, I hadn’t kept in touch
with Lucius either. When he called me four years ago and sent me her résumé I hired her, not because she was his daughter, but because she was brilliant,” he assured him. “Originally I had intended to put her in Applied Sciences where she could really shine, but she requested we place her into the first entry level position we had which was in IT even though she was grossly overqualified.”

“So you lied to me,” Oliver said slowly. “You knew who she was and you never told me.”

He sighed walked towards him, placing his hand on Oliver’s shoulder comfortingly, “I never lied, Oliver; I just kept her confidence and stayed out of it because that’s what she wanted. When I saw how close you two had gotten, I was truly overjoyed that she was helping you and that you were, in turn, helping her.” His lips tightened for a moment as he seemed to struggle with something, “Like I said, I watched her grow up but I never really had a large presence in her life. I can’t tell you much, it’s not my place, but one thing I can tell you is that she is truly Lucius Fox’s daughter. She has his integrity and sense of honor. I saw you get better and I had hoped your mother would see that as well, that she would recognize that Felicity had made an important impact upon your life. I thought about telling your mother who she was after their confrontation but I knew that if Felicity hadn’t yet shared that part of her life with you then it wasn’t my place.”

“Why didn’t she tell me?” Oliver said, his anger at his mother now turning into resentment toward Felicity and the pain of loss he now felt at her absence.

Walter dropped his hand from his shoulder and shook his head, “I can’t say.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

Walter’s lips thinned in contrition once again, “Things weren’t always easy for her, Oliver.” He walked away, turning his back on him as he rubbed the back of his neck in consternation. He glanced up at him, “Maybe you should be discussing this with her?”

“I can’t,” he bit out, averting his eyes. “Something…something happened and she left. She went back to Gotham and she’s not coming back.”

“This contract you were talking about?” Walter asked looking up sharply. “Is it related to…?” He let the question hang in the air between them.

“I don’t know,” Oliver said honestly. Walter rarely discussed his being the Arrow with him openly even though he was considered a team friendly. “All I know is that the Bat showed up and told us he had information that a contract had been placed on Felicity approximately eighteen months ago.”

“Batman was here?” Understanding lit up his eyes, “And thus you immediately thought of your mother and her campaign,” he nodded to himself. “Did you consider Slade or Blood?”

“If Slade or Blood wanted to kill Felicity, they would have done it themselves,” Oliver told him.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Walter asked, his eyes sharp.

Oliver debated revealing everything for a moment before deciding to go with his gut, “Isabel Rochev approached Felicity the other day and revealed that she knows who I am and the identities of some of our team members. Supposedly she tried to recruit her for some kind of private vigilante army being backed by Stellmoor.”

Again, Walter’s eyes opened wide in surprise, “Does she know about--?”

“No,” Oliver told him. “At least I don’t think so. The only other person on my team aware of the fact
that you know my secret besides Diggle and myself, is Felicity, but you might want to be prepared just in case.”

He nodded solemnly, “So that’s why you sent Felicity away? To protect her?”

“Among other things,” he responded grimly.

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely. “I know that must have been very hard for you.” He paused, “Any chance it was Isabel Rochev?”

“It’s possible, but again she’s had numerous opportunities to take her out and it just doesn’t make sense. Besides, if she had put a hit on Felicity, she would have followed through with the contract.” Walter nodded as he agreed with his logic. “What can you tell me about…about Felicity’s past?” He asked hesitantly. “I know you want to keep her confidence, and I appreciate that, but I need to know if this threat is on our end or if it started off in Gotham.”

Walter again seemed torn for a moment, “What did she tell you?”

“Not much,” Oliver admitted. “Just that she had a brother and a sister and that Lucius was her dad. She did mention that she was stalked by some frat kid in college when she was 14 but I doubt that has any bearing on anything other than the fact that the guy was a creep.”

“Sebastian Hady’s son,” Walter said grimly. “I remember that. The boy’s father is Gotham’s version of Deleon but you’re probably right about there being no connection. He died a few years ago in a drunken driving accident. Honestly, I can’t think of anyone who would target Felicity who isn’t connected with your extracurricular activities. She was…incredibly sheltered as a child. She literally spent every spare moment in Lucius’s office growing up. I doubt she even had any friends other than immediate family. I never saw her play with any children her own age other than Luke and Tam and, after reconnecting with her when she joined QC, I doubt much had changed for her since I left other than the fact that she spoke more. For a long time I knew that Tanya and Lucius were afraid she was autistic because she was so quiet.”

He couldn’t help but snort at that, “Felicity was quiet?”

Walter smiled and leaned against the corner of his desk, “Believe it or not, yes. She was so quiet that most of the time you’d forget she was even in the room. She’d just sit in the corner and read a book or draw while Lucius worked even as a toddler. Even before Evie died she practically lived in that little corner. Because she was so ill and her immune system was so badly compromised, Felicity had to be kept away from her so Lucius and his office became her whole world. I remember watching Lucius nearly break down once when she referred to it as ‘home’ because, for her, that’s what it had become. He wound up taking a partial leave of absence and started working primarily from their apartment shortly after that so they could all be together for the end. It was a bit sad really. After Evie died he came back to the office and brought her with him because she was all he had left and he was positively terrified of letting her out of his sight. Now I realize he probably wasn’t doing her any favors by keeping her from socializing with other children her own age. She became a very lonely child because of the fact that he wasn’t coping well with his loss, but I wasn’t a parent at the time, nor could I possibly understand what he was going through, so I didn’t want to interfere. Lucius was a good father and he was doing the best he could; she seemed happy so I kept my mouth shut.”

“Who’s Evie?” Oliver asked as he filed away all the other information he’d been given for later.

“Her mother.”

“I thought you said her mother’s name was Tanya?” He frowned.
“Tanya was Lucius’s first wife. She took an interest in Felicity after her mother died and helped out with her occasionally.”

“That’s …unusual,” Oliver said slowly.

“The Fox’s are an unusual family,” Walter said with a slight smile. “Lucius and Tanya have an unusually amicable relationship for a divorced couple. Their example is what made me want to maintain a friendship with your mother after our divorce.”

“How did she die?”

Walter looked at him sadly. “ALL; leukemia,” he clarified softly. “It was a highly aggressive form of the disease. As I understand it, it usually has a very high success rate of cure in young children but, because she was older when she was diagnosed, the rate of survival dropped dramatically and the disease progressed rapidly. She was nineteen when she was diagnosed but went into remission and they thought it was gone but then she got sick again when Felicity was three. Even with the finest medical advances available she died within months of its return. Lucius was, as I said, devastated,” Walter said forlornly, his face hidden in shadow. “He honestly thought she’d pull through, even until the very end. I don’t think he’s ever stopped loving her either. She was only twenty-three and she and Lucius had been married less than three years. It was quite tragic, for a lot of reasons really.”

“What do you mean?” Oliver asked curiously.

“I probably should stop here,” Walter said with a certain amount of reluctance. “I’ve said far too much as it is.”

“Please,” he asked him. “I’d really like to know.”

Walter sighed and looked down at the carpet, not meeting his eyes. “Tanya and Lucius had been married for over twenty years before he left her for Evie. She was less than half his age, a bit of a bohemian, she had an illegitimate daughter, and the rumor was that she had no idea who the father was. It was all nonsense, of course,” he added quickly. “It was just easier for the public to believe that a rich older man sought out a beautiful twenty year old girl for a midlife fling and dumped his wife and two children in the process rather than see the truth of the situation.”

“Which was?” Oliver asked.

“That he and Tanya hadn’t been happy for a while. She had left him a few months previously but the fact that Lucius and Evie fell in love so quickly made people suspicious. They moved in together less than a week after they met and he filed for divorce less than a month after that. People liked to say that she had some sort of hold on him, that she seduced him from his family somehow. The fact that they made such a strikingly unusual couple didn’t help.”

“Because of their differences in ages?” Oliver said with a furrowed brow. “Rich men marry much younger women all the time.”

“Gotham is different than Starling City,” he told him ruefully. “In many ways it’s far more conservative, but that’s not what I meant. Evie was very…unusual. She was strikingly beautiful but she was also…” he hesitated.

“Also?” Oliver prompted.

He grimaced, “She was…um, damn.” He sighed, “She had a genetic condition that added a bit to her overall mysterious allure. Because of that she made some people rather uncomfortable and she often got stares even from people who didn’t know the story behind their union.”
“What kind of ‘genetic condition’?” Oliver asked with a frown.

Walter shook his head as though debating something internally. “She was…she suffered from albinism.”

“Seriously?” Oliver said, taken aback.

Walter shut his eyes in mortification. “I don’t really know the politically correct term for it but she suffered from a mild form of albinism that left her with very pale hair, light skin, and very bright blue eyes; she was quite strikingly beautiful, hauntingly beautiful in fact but, at first glance, those unused to such things could easily confuse her unusual looks with deliberate artifice on her part. Albinos, and again I use that term because I don’t know how else to refer to her condition, are apparently quite familiar with a certain amount of prejudice due to their appearance although that doesn’t excuse it, of course. It was even worse in Evie’s case because not only was she unique in her appearance and personality, but she in an interracial relationship with a very high profile man. Lucius being black and her being so pale and young, in addition to the fact that she worked as a cocktail waitress in Las Vegas before her art career took off, seemed to fit into every ugly stereotype about successful black men choosing to leave their families for younger white women. Your mother and I occasionally experienced some prejudice but never to the extent Evie and Lucius had to endure. Her albinism was mild enough that she appeared to be merely very fair-skinned as long as she used cosmetics but her hair color and the fact that she had to wear very dark large framed prescription sunglasses most of the time due to her extreme sensitivity to light made it easy for the press to paint her as the stereotypical bleach blonde temptress who had snagged a rich black man to pull her and her daughter out of the gutter. It didn’t matter that she was a very successful artist or that Tanya had filed for separation before they’d even met; that didn’t sell papers.” He flushed and looked down at the carpet again, “For a while, Lucius’s reputation took a beating for it and people could be very cruel to Felicity in particular even after her mother’s death.”

“Why? She was just a kid,” Oliver said perturbed at the thought of adults picking on a child who had just lost her mother over the perceived sins of her parents.

“Prejudice never makes sense, Oliver,” Walter said kindly. “As I said before, Starling is a very liberal place compared to Gotham. If Thomas and Martha Wayne were the Kennedy’s of Gotham, Lucius and Tanya Fox were the Obama’s. Any woman Lucius chose after Tanya would have been vilified, but that a powerful black man of such standing would choose a teenaged white girl with no higher education and no social standing over someone as intelligent and accomplished as his first wife was seen as a scandal of epic proportions. Felicity, following her mother’s death, was often used as a scapegoat by others for that and many other reasons. Now people view blended families much differently than they did then, but even I would get looks and questions when I’d take Thea to the mall and she was a teenager when Moira and I married. A black man carrying a little white girl around who referred to him as ‘daddy’ upset people on many levels. She was a white child, a baby, being raised by a single black man and it raised people’s hackles. It made them think monstrously inappropriate thoughts and had Lucius not been who he was, I don’t doubt he would have had a harder time gaining and retaining custody of her despite the adoption.”

“That’s just wrong,” Oliver muttered.

Walter smiled, “And the fact that you and the young people of your generation recognize that is what gives me hope. There will always be thoughtless people in this world, Oliver. Your son, Connor, is of mixed race but, hopefully, he’ll never be made to feel any different because he was lucky enough to be born in a time of change. Even so, evil will always exist as will stupidity; as parents, it’s our job to teach our children differently and hope they pass it along to the next generation.”
Walter referring to him as a parent made him feel as though a hole was opening in his chest. Clearing his throat, he pressed on, “It just…Felicity has always been such a bright and happy person,” he said shaking his head. “I almost feel like I failed her somehow. I mean, she’s one of the people I trust most in this world—hell, she is the one person I trust most in this world…” He swallowed and looked up at the older man, his face a mask of pain and self-doubt, “I know you said she wanted to keep her identity under wraps for professional reasons but…do you think she thought I would have--?”

“No, not at all,” Walter said quickly. “Felicity and her mother have very similar personalities. Evie was very present and in the moment, a true optimist and child of today. She never dwelled in the past or worried about the future which made her very unusual and, quite frankly, a breath of fresh air to those who got to know her. If Felicity didn’t tell you any of this it wasn’t out of shame or fear, it was because she was more concerned with the present and her friendship with you now than sharing details about her past, that’s all. Felicity may appear very conservative but she often shows flashes of her mother’s bohemian spirit. She is very much her mother’s daughter in that regard.” He paused for a moment, “You know, the thing that struck me the most when I first saw her when she came to QC was how much she had changed but how she still looked so much like Evie at the same time.”

“Felicity’s not an albino,” Oliver pointed out dumbly, his mind reeling from the information he’d been given.

“No, not entirely,” Walter chuckled. “I remember Lucius having her tested for it though due to her eye problems along with her fair coloring.” At Oliver’s inquisitive look he expounded, “She had extremely pale blonde hair; it was nearly white as a child. She colors it to make it darker so as not to stand out. Still, even with her darker hair and glasses she looks almost exactly like Evie.”

It’s weird the things one remembers…

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“I thought it would be helpful to track ARGUS’s manhunt for Floyd Lawton aka Deadshot. So I decrypted their communication logs. Which means, I just hacked a federal agency. Kind of makes me a cyber-terrorist, which is bad because I really don’t see myself fitting in well at Guantanamo Bay.”

“Don’t worry, Felicity. They don’t send blondes there,” He told her mockingly.

“I dye it actually…I keep your secret!”

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So many secrets. So much time wasted. Oliver turned slightly as his heart clenched in his chest. More and more of what she’d told him over the years had begun to click into place. Her reluctance to discuss her family, her resentment of her mother, the little factoids she’d dropped about her being a cocktail waitress, her tolerance of the cruel remarks he’d seen her endure without complaint…

Thinking about her mother also brought another memory to the surface, one he didn’t care to think about but this might be the only chance he’d ever have to ask, “Did Felicity’s biological father ever come into the picture? Do you know anything about him or who he is?”
“Why?” Walter asked. “Do you think the threat against Felicity could be related to her biological father?”

“It’s very possible,” Oliver said vaguely. “She told us once that he abandoned their family when she was little and you said she looked strikingly similar to her mother. Someone might have recognized her and put the pieces together. During that period of time she was often seen in the press standing beside me. Someone who had a grudge against her father might have come after her to get to him.”

“It’s an interesting theory but I doubt she even knew his name and, from what little bit Lucius told me, I don’t believe her biological father even knew she existed,” Walter told him. “Lucius didn’t even know his name, I think. I remember him worrying about that after Evie died. He adopted Felicity when she was just over a year old but he was worried because he had no idea who her biological father was or if he’d ever come forth to try to establish paternity. That was a troubling loophole in the adoption because they’d never gotten him to sign a release of parental rights. Evie claimed not to know enough about him to even put his name on Felicity’s birth certificate so they couldn’t track him down. I didn’t have the whole story and I never pressed him for it but, according to Lucius, Evie met him shortly after she was initially diagnosed. She had a one night stand, understandable given the fact that she was nineteen and told she was terminally ill. She got pregnant and had the baby before going into a brief remission. The ALL returned about a year or so after she and Lucius were married and she died a little over a year after that. He hired private investigators, sought out her friends and business associates for information, he even went to Las Vegas and hired private investigators there as well, but none of them knew anything about the man. She’d always kept his identity secret from everyone.”

But she didn’t, Oliver thought. Somehow Felicity had heard his name and had said her mother had been the source of that information. Could she have told her as a child? Was it a real name or just something the dying woman had made up; a story of a handsome foreign prince, a fairy tale that Felicity’s young mind had confused with the truth perhaps? Mysteries leading to more mysteries and still no answers.

Fuck.

Oliver nodded, feeling more frustrated than ever, “Thank you. I appreciate you telling me.”

“I’m only sorry I couldn’t be more help,” he told him. “Oliver, if Felicity is in danger then I should call her father and let him know.”

“No need,” he told him. “Batman is on it plus Bruce Wayne is aware of the threat. He contacted him as soon as he found out and Wayne immediately hired movers and whisked her back to Gotham the same day.”

“That’s good,” Walter said, noticeably relieved. “The Wayne’s and the Fox’s are practically family. Lucius’s first wife was Bruce’s godmother and I believe that they were in Martha and Thomas’s wills as his secondary guardians next to Alfred Pennyworth.”

“I didn’t know that,” Oliver said grimly but Walter didn’t seem to notice the chill in his voice.

“That’s a weight off my mind, at least,” he said quietly. “I know that you’ll miss her terribly but at least you can rest easy knowing that Bruce is there to keep her safe; and your friend, Batman, of course.”

“Of course,” Oliver said with forced assurance. He approached Walter and held out his hand, “I’m sorry for coming at you like that but I had to know.”
He took his hand and shook it gratefully, “No need to apologize. I might have done the same were I you. Still,” he looked at him, his eyes pleading, “I want you to know that I don’t believe your mother did this, Oliver. I know she’s done a lot and her secrets have had far-reaching consequences in the past, but if Felicity was ever in danger, it wasn’t from Moira.” He paused for a moment as though pained, “The night she died we spoke on the phone. She mentioned Felicity specifically.”

“What?” Oliver looked up in surprise. “You never told me that.”

“I suppose I didn’t think it was important then, but now…” He shook his head. “Your mother told me that she had a lot of apologizing to do; to you, to Thea, and to Felicity.”

“Did she say what for?” He asked him.

“The way she’d treated her when she came to her about Thea,” he told him. “That was…that was my fault,” he said quietly. “The whole thing. Felicity came to me before she went to Moira. She asked me to speak to her, convince her to tell Thea the truth. I hesitated; I couldn’t think of a way to even begin to confront Moira about it and, I suppose, Felicity finally got tired of my procrastinating and took matters into her own hands.”

“Did my mother know Felicity was Lucius’s daughter?” He asked curiously.

“I doubt it,” he told him. “At least not before she confronted her that evening. I’m sure she had her investigated afterwards, but she never said anything to me about it.” He furrowed his brow, “Although, now that I think about it, it’s possible. Especially given what she said that night.”

“What did she say?”

“She said she should have known that given who Felicity was, she would show not only that much loyalty to you and your family, but that she would have both the intelligence and humility to save the company from Isabel without ever needing to take any credit. She went on to say that if it was the last thing she ever did, she’d find a way to make things right between all of you.”

Oliver frowned, “What does that mean; save our company from Isabel? When did Felicity do that?”

“Oliver,” Walter chuckled, “don’t you remember?” He let out a breath, “I suppose not; we were all a bit frayed around the edges. Do you remember the night Slade kidnapped your sister?”

“Vividly,” he said wryly.

“The board had appointed new officers but, because of the kidnapping, you had to put off the meeting,” Walter reminded him.

“And you came in as CEO pro tempore, what of it?” He asked.

He smirked, “Do you remember Isabel’s reaction to that?”

He shrugged, “Vaguely,” he said. “I kind of had my mind on other things.”

“Let me remind you then.”

Things were crazy, people were running around in a frenzy, Slade had just sent a video message of Thea tied to a chair looking terrified, and Isabel looked positively livid as she tore into a member of the political staff at Moira’s campaign headquarters.
“If I hear about one more invasive press inquiry being sent to Mr. Queen or to any member of the Queen family, I will hold you personally responsible,” she all but snarled at the poor man as he hurried away, her voice practically dripping with ice and venom.

“You're very scary,” Oliver said, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. Isabel wasn’t usually this protective of anyone or anything except her own bottom line.

“Thank you,” she told him, her lips turning upwards in a cool but pleased smile. “My job is to take things off your plate, now more than ever.” She paused to offer him a pained grimace, “To that end, you remember how at today’s meeting, the board nominated new officers? Voting has to take place within 24 hours. It cannot be suspended. It's an SEC thing.”

“I can't think about this right now,” Oliver told her in a mixture of frustration and exhaustion.

She offered him a surprisingly sympathetic look, her tone soft and almost pleasant, “I know, and I'm sorry, but you have to. You're the CEO and you have responsibilities--!”

He cut her off, “Which you handle for me all the time.”

She looked at him in exasperation, “A board vote is several orders of magnitude different from covering a missed meeting.” She grimaced at his dark look before suggesting reluctantly, “You could appoint someone CEO pro tempore…”

He scowled. “Fine,” he bit out as he ran his fingers through his hair. He reached for a pad and a pen. “You do it.”

“That's not a good idea,” she told him as she watched him begin to write.

“She’s right,” Felicity said rushing over and snatching the pen from his hand.

“Damn it, Felicity,” he growled at her, reaching to take the pen back but she stepped back just as Walter stepped forward.

“I already spoke to Walter and he said he could do it,” she told him quickly. “I have the paperwork here; I just have to print it out and have you guys sign.”

“Why would you…?” Oliver said taken aback, “How?”

“Oliver, I’m your EA,” she said rolling her eyes at him. “I’ve been reminding you about this meeting for weeks now and, since you’ve blown off every single meeting you’ve had for the last month, I figured it was better to be safe than sorry. Besides, it’s a pretty standard form letter. You just have to sign and initial.”

“Felicity just told me about the meeting tonight,” Walter told him, coming to stand beside her. “If you like, I would be happy to act as CEO pro tempore and take over as your stand-in until Thea is back home where she belongs.”

“Are you sure?” Oliver asked him with a confused frown. “What about Starling National?”

“I can take a temporary leave of absence until this is settled,” he told him. “I’ve already spoken to the president of the bank and he’s agreed to act as both CEO and CFO until this is done.” He looked over towards Moira who was on the verge of collapsing under the weight of her grief. “Oliver, your family needs you. Let me worry about Queen Consolidated while you take care of your family.”

“This isn’t a good idea at all,” Isabel sputtered, her tone verging on strident. “The board could see
awarding your proxy to Mr. Steele as a conflict of interest.”

“I don’t see how,” Walter said coolly. “I was both CEO and CFO at Queen Consolidated for years and I still have a substantial financial stake in the company through the bank.”

“Exactly,” she turned to Oliver, purposefully cutting Walter out of the conversation. “Oliver, handing the reins of power over to Walter could seriously erode your standing with the board. He sold all his voting shares back to you, remember? They could see this as him either making a power play or think that he’s trying to destabilize QC enough that you’ll default on your loan so the bank can take controlling interest in the company away from you.”

“I would never do that!” Walter said taking umbrage, “Nor would anyone on the board ever accuse me of such. I appointed most of them personally, for God’s sake.”

“Walter—” Oliver began.

“I can do it,” Felicity spoke up.

“What?” Oliver said in surprise, turning to her.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Isabel said with a snort. “You’re just a secretary!”

“I’m a shareholder,” she returned. “SEC rules state that anyone can be named CEO pro tempore as long as they are both a shareholder and no conflict of interest exists. I can do it.”

Oliver took her by the elbow, speaking in low tones, “I need you with me, not at some meeting.”

“Oliver, if you don’t appoint someone right now, QC is facing major sanctions,” she told him. “Just pick; me or Walter, who’s it going to be?”

He looked between them, “I…”

“I’ll do it,” Isabel said firmly. “I’ve been handling most of the day to day operations anyway; you can appoint me CEO until you come back.”

“And how would that not be a conflict of interest, Ms. Rochev?” Walter asked her with a hard look. “You attempted a hostile takeover last year; if Oliver made you his proxy that would be like him signing over all of his stock leaving you with 100% of the voting rights.”

“You know what; I really don’t have time for this!” Oliver practically growled. He turned to Walter, “Are you sure you can handle it?”

“If someone questions my position, I’ll call Felicity and you can send her in instead,” Walter told him. He cut his eyes towards Isabel, “She was absolutely right in that as both a shareholder and your Executive Assistant she could easily handle this meeting in your place. It’s a bit unconventional but perfectly legal.”

Felicity already had her tablet out and walked over to one of the printers to collect several papers. “Here,” she said, handing them and his pen to him. “Sign and initial both copies and then pass them to Walter so he can sign as well.”

“Call me if you run into trouble,” Oliver told him shortly as he signed the first then the second set of papers.

“I will but, as I said, there shouldn’t be any problems,” he told him as he accepted the papers from
Oliver and pulled a pen from the inner pocket of his jacket so he could sign as well.

“Fine!” Oliver said, handing the second copy over to Isabel. “Happy?” He asked her before turning to Walter, “Congratulations, you’re CEO again.”

“Hopefully not for long,” Walter told him.

“Don’t tempt me,” Oliver said grimly, grasping Felicity by the elbow again and hurrying out of the room.

“I don’t…” He grimaced, “I was so focused on Slade having Thea I suppose I never even thought about it.”

“When I told Moira that it was Felicity who stopped you from signing the company over to Isabel that day, she was so incredibly grateful to her.” Walter told him sincerely. “I assure you, your mother may have attempted to intimidate Felicity, but she’d never try to hurt her; not physically and she certainly wouldn’t try to have her killed.”

The blood in his veins ran cold as he thought about what could have happened if he had signed his proxy votes over to Isabel that day. In order to buy the remaining shares in QC he and his mother had to leverage everything; their homes, their other investment properties, even their trusts. He could have easily lost it all.

Even then Felicity was protecting him and he never even thought to thank her.

“Thanks,” he told the other man with quiet sincerity. “I mean it, Walter; thank you. For everything.”

“You’re welcome, son,” he said, clasping him warmly on the shoulder. “Just take care of yourself and keep Felicity safe.”

He nodded silently before making his way out.

As he made his way to his car, he let out a frustrated breath. He still wasn’t as sure as Walter that Moira was in the clear but it was looking less and less likely. He’d continue to investigate it, of course, but something told him it would be a dead end. A lot of what Walter had told him about Felicity’s past had resonated with him, and he now had a better picture of the woman he thought he knew inside and out over the last four years, but one thing in particular had snagged his attention:

“I doubt she even knew his name…”

But she did know his name; in fact she knew two of them.

And while he knew where one trail ended, his wasn’t the only name that had been spoken that night.

Felicity sat on the couch in the living room bundled up in her pink kitty and coffee cup robe and warm and fuzzy jimjams as she sipped the god-awful herbal tea Diggle had given her and looked at the two cards on her lap. One was from Jake and the other from Miranda Tate, one of them filling her with dread but not the one that probably should.

What if Tam was right and the Stellmoor offer was legitimate? She toyed with the idea for a moment. As of right now she didn’t have a job and the idea of working at Wayne Enterprises was out of the
question as was anything to do with LexCorp. She could go back to being a consultant but the work would be inconsistent and she still wouldn’t be doing what she really loved. She liked being a member of Team Arrow, she liked making a difference in people’s lives. You could teach, came a thought from the back of her head. It’s not exactly the same as taking down drug dealers and Triad gang members but you’d be making a difference. The only problem was that it sounded as bland as the oatmeal her dad had been complaining about that morning.

She was doomed to live a plain oatmeal kind of life, unless…

She tilted the card under the light and watched as the design in the holographic ‘S’ shifted and changed. She put it down and picked up Jake’s card instead. He was sweet, she thought. He’d probably be a great boyfriend, too. Solid, dependable, the kind of guy who treated a girl like she was made of glass but still let her be herself. He’d never roll out of bed and hand her the ‘My life is too dangerous’ speech. He had a dangerous job plus he was ex-Army so he could probably understand all she’d been through without judging her for it. Plus, as an added bonus, he could appreciate her ‘I jumped out of a plane and landed on a landmine’ story better than most people ever could. He definitely seemed pretty sane and normal compared to the other men in her life. She didn’t know him well but she’d be willing to bet that he wouldn’t wake up one morning and decide to go swinging from rooftop to rooftop fighting crime. Call it a hunch but she couldn’t see a guy with teddy bear brown eyes who blushed the way he did hurling bat shaped throwing stars and arrowing people in the chest because they failed the city.

She sighed. If she left that life behind then her future would be filled with men like Jake Simmons; nice, polite young gentlemen who would treat her the way her dad expected a ‘respectable young lady’ to be treated. That card represented a life without masks. It would be a fulfilling life, it would get the job done just like her dad’s daily bowl of oatmeal, but something about it just made her want to say ‘bah’ and hide behind her paper as she dreamed of hacking into Federal databases.

Two choices in front of her and only one of them was the right one. She could spend the rest of her life being driven from one place to another as ‘Baby’ or she could be the kick-ass handler of a group of all-female vigilantes. If that was all there was to it then ‘kick-ass’ beat ‘Baby’ every time but it wasn’t. Isabel and Stellmoor knew about the Arrow, knew about Oliver. She could be walking right into a trap.

“Gotham has gotten even more dangerous since you’ve been gone.”

According to Paul DioGuardi there had been threats against her dad, enough that both the company’s head of security and Alfred were reluctant to even let her get a cab by herself. Maybe it was just them being overprotective but there had been something in Paul’s eyes when he spoke. Isabel had told her that they wanted to start a team in Gotham. She’d be able to make a difference, protect her family, and yes, show Bruce once and for all that she could take care of herself. Even if she went back to Starling City the relationship she had with Oliver had changed forever. She doubted she’d ever be allowed back with the team again. What if she split the difference and didn’t choose either one but struck out on her own instead? The story she’d handed Bruce on that rooftop wasn’t so far from the truth; she could have easily been the head of a secret organization of Arrows. She could do it. She could recruit ex-military like Dig or Jake and have them train people as she handled the tech and gave the orders. It wasn’t all that different than what she’d been doing for the last several years when you really thought about it. So, which was it going to be; Stellmoor, go independent and start from scratch, or spend the rest of her life as ‘Baby’? Risk Stellmoor, risk it all, or play it safe.

“Hey,” her brother said as he vaulted over the couch and sat down heavily beside her as he reached for the remote. “What’re those?”
“Nothing,” Felicity said, pocketing the cards. She looked over at her brother who was flipping through the channels. “How did the doctor’s appointment go?”

“Waste of time,” he shrugged. “Made Peggy Ann feel better though so it was worth it.” He looked at her fuzzy Sock Monkey pajama bottoms and matching purple tank top under her robe with a raised eyebrow, “I see someone has a thrilling night ahead of them, huh? Hot date?”

“Only if you count my love affair with Entenmann's and Ben and Jerry’s a hot date,” she said wryly.

“Ooh, we have cake?” Luke looked up eagerly.

“There’s always cake, we just have to find dad’s stash,” Tam said as she strolled into the room with Tim trailing behind her.

“Hey bud,” Luke said reaching for Tim’s hand with the one not in a sling and offering him a fist bump.

“Dude, check out the war wound on you, huh?” Tim said as he plopped down on the couch beside him.

“Got it wrestling with a guy who was transformed into a giant lion centaur by a radioactive meteorite,” Luke said off-handedly as he showed off his temporary cast.

“Nice,” Tim said bobbing his chin in approval.

“You are so frickin’ weird,” Felicity snorted missing the amused look her two siblings and Tim shared when she wasn’t looking.

“Baby, why are you in your PJ’s? It’s not even seven o’clock!” Tam said with a frown. “That’s so sad.”

Felicity turned to her sister, “What’s so sad about getting into your warm and fuzzies so you can relax in front of the TV?”

“Are you kidding? Just the fact that you still refer to your pajamas as your ‘warm and fuzzies’ is tragic,” Tam said with a wince.

“Leave Baby alone,” her dad said as he wandered into the room straightening the tie to his tux as he dropped a kiss on the top of Tam’s head. “I think she looks cute in her little monkey pants.”

“Gee, thanks Dad,” Felicity muttered as Luke snorted beside her repeating the words ‘monkey pants’ until she poked him in the ribs with her elbow.

“Timothy,” Lucius said coolly as he suddenly stopped short and greeted Tim.

“Mr. Fox,” Tim said clearing his throat as he scrambled off the couch and held out his hand in greeting.

Lucius glared at Tim’s hand without shaking it. “I understand that you were in my daughter’s apartment the other day at a very early hour borrowing, what was it again, ‘sugar’?”

“Sugar?” Tim asked in confusion then turned to Tam for help. At his girlfriend’s frantic gesturing he cleared his throat again and straightened his posture. “Oh, yes sir, I, uh, like putting it on my…cereal. For breakfast.”

“And you thought that the best time to borrow said sugar was sometime before dawn?” Lucius asked
him imperiously.

“I’m an early riser?” Tim said weakly.


“And you had to go all the way to my daughter’s apartment to get it even though there are dozens of all night convenience stores open between here and Wayne Manor?”

Tim swallowed as he tried to come up with a logical answer, “Um, sir, the truth is that I spent the night in your daughter's apartment.” At Tam’s wide-eyed look and Lucius’s clenched jaw he quickly added, “On the couch, sir! All night. Nothing happened. It was totally innocent!”

“On the couch, huh?” Lucius repeated dubiously.

“Yes sir, on the couch,” he confirmed wide-eyed and nodding like a bobble-head. “Your daughter and I went out for dinner and got into a discussion, the time got away from us, and she kindly invited me to use her couch. Just her couch and nothing else.”

“How old are you now, Tim?” Lucius asked him after a long pause.

“Um, old enough to know better, sir?” He answered meekly.

“Son, the way I see it you can either learn to cover your tracks better or you can bite the bullet and take your chances with telling the truth because you can’t lie for shit,” he told him bluntly.

“Yes sir,” Tim agreed, his cheeks aflame with humiliation.

Luke started snickering loudly until Lucius smacked him in the back of the head. “Ow! Dad! What did you hit me for? Tam’s the one being all scandalous, not me.”

“I seem to recall you being involved in a scandalous situation or two,” Lucius told him without any heat. “Or have you forgotten the incident with you and the Ambassador’s daughter in the pool?”

“Oh yeah,” Luke said as he rubbed the back of his head. “I wonder if she’s still in town?”

“Keep it out of the pool. We had to drain it the last time you went bouncing your naked butt in there,” he told him.

“Where are you going all dressed up, Daddy?” Felicity asked in an attempt to change the subject before one of her siblings chose to bring up any of her scandalous behavior as of late.

“Fundraiser for the library,” he said looking around the room. “I don’t suppose any of you kids want to go throw something on and join me?”

They all spoke up at the same time:

“Already in my warm and fuzzies.”

“Library fundraiser? Snooze! Not.”

“Lion ate my tux, Dad. Sorry.”

“I barely talked my way out of going to that thing when Barbara handed me my invitation personally.”
Lucius turned to the last speaker with a hard eye. “I wasn’t actually speaking to you Tim but it’s nice to know that I’m not the only one you’ve tried that bull-malarkey on lately.”


“Peggy Ann has the night off so you kids order something in. She told me that if she finds her kitchen in a mess that she’s taking it out of your hides,” he took a moment to eye Luke. “Understood?”

“Why do I always get the dirty looks around here?” Luke asked with a hurt expression.

“Probably because Felicity and I don’t cook and you’re the one responsible for the Great Smoothie Catastrophe or have you forgotten why you decided to leave the country in the first place?” Tam said with a smirk.

“I don’t think that’s why he left the country, per se,” Felicity said. “It was a contributing factor, don’t get me wrong, but I also think he was trying to get away from the six girls he was dating simultaneously because cotillion season was coming and he’d promised he’d escort every one of them to the exact same country club dance.”

“It wasn’t six girls,” he objected, “it was only three and I can’t help it if I have a hard time saying no to a pretty girl, especially when they beg.” He batted his eyelashes exaggeratedly, “Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful.”

“You’re so full of it,” Tam snorted.

“You know, I’ve missed having all you kids back home,” Lucius said with a grin then added wryly, “Even if you all do devolve into a bunch of teenagers the first chance you get.” He reached over and tugged on Felicity’s ponytail, bussing a kiss on her forehead as she tipped her head back to look up at him. “Seeing you in your warm and fuzzies reminds me of when you kids would build forts out of sheets and spend half the night eating junk food and watching movies in here.”

“Ooh, we should have Bed Day like we used to!” Felicity said enthusiastically turning to her siblings and Tim. “Tam, you can borrow some of my pajamas and we can rent some movies and do up popcorn!”

“Great dad, thanks for planting that seed in their heads,” Luke said with a groan.

“Shut up!” Tam swatted at him with a throw pillow as she plopped down on the arm of the couch. “You know you used to love Bed Day as much as we did.”

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“Maybe,” he said with a quirk of his lips. “But I’ll tell you one thing, I am not sitting through another Nick at Nite Marathon or a Julia Roberts film festival. I’ll hop a plane back to Africa before I’m forced to sit through Dying Young one more time, I swear to God.”

“You’re just saying that because you always cry like a baby throughout that whole movie,” Tam snorted.

“Dude, you cried? Over Campbell Scott?” Tim asked with a sneer of disgust.

“If you think that’s bad you should see him during Steel Magnolias,” Felicity chuckled.

“But, huh, she, huh, was, huh, so, huh, YOUNG!!!” Tam fake wailed as she leaned over his shoulder.
“It’s a sad movie,” Luke said in a slightly hurt tone. “Real men can express their emotions too, you know.”

“I do not know you, man. Seriously,” Tim said, shaking his head.

“Tam; mani/pedis and we can MST3K bad horror flicks?” Felicity suggested with a twinkle in her eye.

“Oh yeah, and we can send out for pizza and make hot cocoa!” Tam said enthusiastically as she turned toward her and grasped her hands excitedly.

“Cool with me,” Luke shrugged. “I could go for pizza and I don’t really feel like going out tonight. Tim?”

“Sure,” he shrugged. “I don’t have plans. Hey,” he said with a lopsided grin, “maybe I should run home and grab some pajamas, too.”

“No.” Lucius leveled a finger in his direction causing the smile to drop from the younger man’s expression. “You keep your clothes on in this house, understood.”

“Yes sir,” Tim said with a nod.

“I’m off, don’t make a mess and have fun.” Lucius looked to his son. “Watch him,” he said pointing to Tim before he left.

“Okay Dad, you got it,” Luke said giving him the thumbs up.

As soon as he left Tim sunk down in the couch with a groan. “Your dad hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you, my sweet widdle honey-bunny,” Tam said in a pouty baby-talk as she plopped down beside him and wrapped him up in a hug.

“Oh no, he hates you, dude. Totally. Like loathes you,” Luke said dryly. “He looks at you and sees the little bastard who has had copious sex with his daughter. Your only options now are to leave the country or marry my sister and even then you’re screwed.”

“Marriage?” Tim repeated in a panicked tone as he suddenly sat up straight.

“Oh, but don’t you want to make an honest woman out of me, lovah?” Tam asked in an exaggerated drawl and she draped herself over his lap in a mock swoon. “Why whatevah will happen to our baby if you leave me in my time of need? Oh, the scandal!”

“Don’t-don’t-don’t even joke about that,” Tim stuttered. “T-that is not funny.”

“Yeah, knock her up, that’ll really make our dad see the light,” Luke snorted.

“Did you know that the morning after pill is $49.99 plus tax?” Felicity asked with a frown before turning to the others. “For one pill; that’s high, isn’t it?” At their blank stares she shrugged, “What? I was trying to add to the conversation plus I drank a whole lot of champagne before lunch.”

“Yeah,” Tam said slowly. “Um, Baby, now that it’s just us do you want to go ahead and talk about what happened with you and Bruce?”

“Or we could just make popcorn and order take-out?” She suggested helpfully.

“Who’s to say we can’t do both?” Luke added.
“I can go run down to Red Box,” Tim offered. “There’s one on the corner and I can pick up some snacks and a case of beer.”

“I could go for a brew,” Luke said, perking up.

“Yuck,” Tam said as she scrunched up her nose. “No beer, it stinks up the whole house and the last thing you need is to make my dad think you were trying to get me liquored up in the TV room.”

“Soda?” Tim said with a gulp.

“Diet, and Felicity and I will order the food.” She grinned, “We can do ‘around the world’ just like when we were kids!”

“Around the world?” Tim asked her in a low murmur.

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” she snorted.

“‘Around the world’ was when we would get a bunch of menus and order food from as many different take-out joints as we could,” Luke explained. “Chinese, pizza, burgers, Thai, sushi, barbecue, Indian food…”

“Evenings filled with world cuisine followed by epic heartburn,” Felicity said in a dreamy tone. “Oh how I have missed those glory days of old.”

“Man, you guys had a lot more fun growing up than I did,” Tim said with a hint of envy. “Bruce’s idea of family fun involved staking out the mob in the freezing rain on some random rooftop. Uh, by the way; spandex and Kevlar chafe when wet.”

“Tim,” Felicity hissed, shaking her head.

“What?” Tim asked with a frown.

She jerked her head toward Luke and shook her head.

“I don’t get it,” Tim said, looking from Tam to Luke. Meanwhile, Luke had his hand over his eyes and tilted his head back with a groan.

“Lucas Fox, I think you got some s’plainin’ to do,” Tam said in a sing-song.

“How did you manage to keep your cover as Red Robin secret for this long, dude? Seriously?” Luke asked shooting him a dirty look. “Dad was right, you do lie for shit.”

“Should I be offended by that?” He asked, turning to Tam.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Felicity asked looking between the three before settling her gaze on Luke. “You know about Tim and Bruce? What else do you know? What am I missing?”

“Okay,” Luke said clearing his throat as he turned to Felicity, taking her hand gently in his own. “First off, don’t panic.”

Felicity felt all the air leave her lungs. “Never, ever, ever begin a sentence with the words ‘don’t panic’ and expect a person not to panic. What is it? What don’t I know?”

Luke smiled calmly, “Do you remember when I joined the Peace Corps?”

“Yeah, dad hit the roof, why?”
“I didn’t actually join the Peace Corps,” Luke said in a measured tone.

“What do you mean?” Felicity said slowly.

“I didn’t join the Peace Corps, I went with Bruce and trained and then I went to Africa to become Batwing.”

“What?” Felicity said flatly.


“What the hell is a ‘Batwing’?” Felicity asked with a confused frown.

Tam clutched her stomach and began to laugh as Luke’s face fell, “Wait, you haven’t heard of ‘Batwing’?”

“No, what is it; some kind of experimental plane or something? Are you working for Wayne AeroTech now or is this one of Bruce’s ‘special projects’? I mean, that sounds cool; ‘Batwing’ sounds totally bad-ass in a geeky Star Wars kind of way, but if that’s all it is then I don’t see why you even bothered keeping it a secret.”

“Oh my God, this is so fucking hilarious!” Tam gasped, tears running down her face as she tried to catch her breath. Even Tim was turning purple as he tried to hold in his laughter.

“Dude,” Tim snickered, “maybe I should take lessons from you because you’re so good even your masked identity is a secret!”

“No, it’s not an experimental plane!” Luke said with a pitiful look. “I’m the Batman of Africa! There hasn’t been anything in the papers over here about it?”

“No,” Felicity said in consternation and looked over to the two other people in the room who had begun laughing even harder. “Wait, is this a joke? ‘Batwing; Batman of Africa’? Really? That doesn’t even make sense. How is that supposed to be funny?”

Tim and Tam began to howl with laughter as Luke sputtered, “B-but I’m Batwing! Batwing is a real thing,” Luke insisted. “Seriously! I fight bad guys and have my own weapons and everything.”

“You can’t be the African Batman!” Felicity said dizzily. “You once tried to blow up the kitchen with frozen fruit and yogurt!”

“I…can’t…breathe,” Tam said, falling onto her hands and knees as she shook with laughter.

“I broke my arm fighting an alien irradiated lion centaur!” Luke insisted.

“You were serious about that?” Felicity asked aghast.

“Oh shit!” Tim said falling off the couch as he began to laugh uproariously.

“Yes!” Luke burst out with a scowl. “I would have taken pictures but I was a little busy at the time!”

“So you’re Batwing?” She said slowly.

“Yes!” Luke said insistently.

“And you were never in the Peace Corps and you don’t really run a charity in Africa?”

“I sent you care packages!” Felicity said angrily. “I baked cookies for your entire fake classroom full of African orphans!”

“And I really enjoyed them!” Luke told her.

Tim used the bottom of his tee-shirt to wipe his eyes, “Oh God, I so want to be a member of this family.” He turned to Tam, “It would be worth marrying you and putting up with your dad’s dirty looks for the rest of my life if this is how you guys spend a Wednesday night.”

“Watch it,” Tam said smacking him on the arm. “When I marry you it better be because I was too cheap to spend $49.99 plus tax and not because my brother is an idiot!”

Tim sobered up quickly, “Okay, again; not funny. No more Baby Daddy jokes, okay? Every time you say something like that I keep imagining your dad standing over me with a bloody ax.”

“So wait,” Felicity said with a scowl, “Tam and I are the only people in the room who have never put on a costume and rumbled with bad guys?”

“Well, technically…” Tam said with an amused look.

Felicity’s face fell. “You too?”

“Once,” Tam said holding up a single finger. “One time but I was fabulous at it.”

“She went by the name ‘Foxy Lady’,,” Tim said with a snort. “The hair alone was worth it though.”

“So I’m the only one in this family who isn’t a masked hero?” Felicity asked, suddenly feeling weirdly left out.

“Well, I was only a mask for, like, a day and you got to do something cool, too.” Tam said helpfully. “You got to work with Batman and the Arrow, right? That’s something.”

“Wait, you worked with the Arrow in Starling City?” Luke asked with a scowl. “Since when?”

“Isn’t that why you’re here?” Felicity asked. “Tam said she called you because of Bruce threatening me with jail after he found out I was working with the Arrow.”

“Uh, no. Tim called me and all he said was that you and Bruce hooked up and he got rough with you,” Luke turned to Tam and Tim. “Care to fill in the blanks or are you two still ROFLing all over the TV room?”

“I got this,” Tim said volunteering. “Felicity apparently lost her virginity in the Batcave and Bruce dumped her and then she moved to Starling City where she met this Arrow dude and went all Oracle. Bruce found out and went Vesuvius and confronted her, things got rough when Felicity told him she was the real Arrow, then he stalked her over brunch and they had sex again and then he dumped her, again. Oliver Queen is the real Arrow and he found out she worked for Batman so he got all pissed off and then they had sex and then he dumped her, too.” Tim paused to catch his breath and frowned, “Also there might have been something about a threesome but Tam made me go make the coffee so I missed it.”

“Threesome?” Luke said in a near shout, his café au lait complexion darkening with outrage. “Bruce made you have a threesome with him and some other guy?!”
“There was no threesome! A threesome did not happen!” Tam insisted slapping Tim on the arm again as Felicity hid her face in her hands in abject humiliation.

“Oh God,” Felicity moaned.

“They’re right, you really do suck at keeping secrets,” Tam hissed at her boyfriend who shrugged sheepishly.

“He asked,” Tim said defensively.

“Okay, someone better start explaining to me what exactly is going on and don’t skimp on the details,” Luke demanded in a low familiar growl and Felicity could see the shadow of the Bat creep over his features the same way it did with Bruce when he was under the cape and cowl. He turned to her and she could see cold hard anger reflected in the tawny gold eyes that she loved so much and her heart stopped as it hit her; it wasn’t a joke. This was real. Luke was…he was…

She couldn’t help it, it was just too much. In an ideal world she would have sucked it up and breezily let fly with every detail; cool and confident like Luke, strong and fearless like her sister, offhandedly with a tinge of smartass like Tim, but she wasn’t them. She was Felicity, just Felicity, and she was so fucking tired of being herself in a world where masks had taken over every person she’d ever loved; masks that rejected her with their secrets and duty and missions and who always seemed to be leaving her behind.

Shame, anger, hurt, exhaustion; all the emotions she’d been feeling for the last several days slammed into her chest and she couldn’t breathe. There was no more oxygen left, it was all gone. Up was down and down was up and there was no control left. She had no control over anything. Who was she kidding? There were no choices to make, not for her. She was adrift and everyone around her seemed to bat her about like she was just an insignificant piece of flotsam carried away with the tide. For a second, for just a moment in time, she had felt safe in her father’s home. She had been sitting happily in her father’s house in sock monkey pajamas attempting to get a grip on her life, feeling hopeful after days of hopelessness, and then it all came crashing back down around her.

The people she thought she knew were strangers.

Felicity began to shake. She drew her knees to her chest, placed her hands over her head and curled into the couch cushions like a turtle retreating into its shell. She needed a time out, she needed to process this and it was too much to take.

Too much.

Luke was…gone. He was gone.

He was there, she could hear him as he called out to her in the distance but it wasn’t him. Her brother was happy and lazy and lovely in the best sense of the word. When she was little he was her world and now he was some stranger who had been infected by the darkness that now surrounded her.

When she was very little she had a writing assignment that asked ‘If someone you loved was an animal what kind of animal would they be and why?’ She picked Luke but she got in trouble because instead of comparing him to a cat or a bird or a dog like the other kids did she compared him to an apple. The teacher said that she did it wrong but that’s what he was to her: Luke was an apple, a very special kind of apple. He didn’t live in a tree, or on a grocery shelf, or in a Farmer’s Market. Luke was an apple in an ice cold barrel at the carnival; the kind of apple they dipped in warm caramel and when you bit into him your senses exploded with the flavor of all that he was. On the
outside his flesh was warm and golden and his eyes glittered like dark sugared candies but when you
bit into him he was crisp and green and no matter how cold the world got he was a bite of
springtime. Luke was fun and beautiful and a strange mixture of gooey decadence and wholesome
purity that confused and delighted the senses. And he was gone. Luke was gone. The Bat had stolen
him away from her.

Luke was gone and in his place was Batman Lite. Luke was Diet Batman. Batman Zero; all of the
flavor and none of the calories.

She began to weep like her world was ending because it was. Her entire world had ended and she
had no control over anything so she cried it all out even though she’d done little else but cry since the
whole mess had begun to unfold. She was not this girl. She was not this cry-baby, weak-kneed,
miserable sack of nothingness with no flavor or backbone but she could only take so much and she
had reached her end.

Batwings and alien irradiated lion centaurs had stolen her caramel apple brother and her life was a
fucking disaster.

From somewhere in the great distance she heard soothing words, felt tender hands reaching for her,
the muttering of slightly panicked tones and self-recriminations, but this was her moment.

Her moment.

She heard her brother’s voice, felt soothing hands brush over her hair.

“It’s okay, Baby. Hush, it’s okay. It’s going to be okay.”

She heard Tim.

“I’m sorry. Oh God, is she okay? I was just joking! Felicity, are you okay?”

She heard Tam.

“Oh crap! What do we do? Should I call someone? Dad? No, don’t call Dad. Shit, shit, shit! Baby,
it’s okay.”

She began to emerge from her cocoon of pain as her body was lifted and shifted onto her brother’s
lap as he gathered her close to his chest and began to mutter something to the other two people in the
room as he removed her glasses carefully and handed them to someone.

“Here, take these. She’s having a panic attack, just give her a minute.”

Suddenly she felt so hot and her whole body was covered in sticky warm sweat. She had to get air.
She began to struggle out of her robe and gasp, “Hot.” The air in her lungs was so hot and it felt like
the heat was making it impossible to get enough oxygen.

“Tam, go get her some water or something,” Luke said.

“Okay,” Tam said quickly.

“No ice, not too cold,” Luke called after her.

“Hey Tim, help me untangle her.”

“Okay,” she felt as other hands gently tried to extricate her from the overly warm chenille of the
robe. “It’s going to be okay, Felicity. Just breathe okay? Slow deep breaths. Tam,” Tim called out
from beside her, “bring a paper bag! She’s hyperventilating!”

“Off!” She gasped as she pulled at the sleeves and heard a ripping noise.

“Crap,” she heard Tim say softly as her arms and shoulders freed themselves.

“I’ve got water and a paper bag,” Tam said in a rush as she jogged up to her side. “Oh. Oh no. Oh Baby, your shoulder…”

“It’s okay, it just looks bad because it’s healing. Give me the water,” Luke said, his voice deep and almost unrecognizable. “Drink Baby, little sips.” She began to drink greedily but he stopped her. “Slowly or you’ll make yourself sick.”

“Do you still need the bag?” Tam asked quietly.

“I think she’ll be okay. Keep taking little sips.”

Felicity took a shuddering breath as her lungs began to function again even though her heart still felt like it was trying to vibrate out of her ribcage. She leaned her face against her brother’s chest and took another deep sobbing breath before whispering, “I’m sorry.”


“For falling apart like this,” she managed through hiccups of breath. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he reassured her.

She stretched out her limbs and climbed up off his lap so she could stand on legs that felt like jelly. She stumbled a bit and Tim stepped forward to offer his support but she waved him off. She snatched a few tissues from the box on the end table and wiped her face and brow then pressed her hand to her chest as if to muffle her heartbeat. Felicity turned away from her companions and walked over to the bank of windows that over looked the city around them. She pressed her face to the cold glass and breathed it in, grateful for their silence as they watched her from the couch.

There were so many emotions under the surface of her skin (humiliation, confusion, guilt) but the worst of it was the overwhelming exhaustion. She just felt drained. She looked at the faces of her family and friend in the pale reflection of the glass and she knew that no matter how much she wanted to ignore it, she had to confront this now. She couldn’t run and hide, there were no more time outs left; she’d had her pity party and now she had no choice but to stiffen her spine and deal.

She cleared her throat and turned to them, an embarrassed little smile ghosting across her lips as she wiped her leaky nose. “Sorry about that,” she said in a hoarse voice. “Believe it or not I’m not this much of a basket case usually.” She tried to laugh and it came out as a strangled kind of hiccup instead. “Panic attack, that’s new. Let’s see, in the past three and a half years I’ve been held at knife point, gun point, arrow point, jumped out of a building and a plane, stepped on a landmine, I was interrogated by the police and threatened with prison, defused a few bombs including one that was wrapped around my neck, I was trapped in a collapsing building, kidnapped by a serial killer who tried to turn me into a plasticized corpse, shot in the shoulder by a mad computer genius with serious OCD, had some really fun times with mind control drugs, and had a contract taken out on my life but, believe it or not, this is my first panic attack.” She looked at the faces of the three people in front of her and watched the range of emotions flit across their faces as what she said filtered through; horror, disbelief, and burning rage. She turned to her brother, “Yeah, well, now you know how I felt when I heard ‘alien irradiated lion centaur’.”

“This coming from Bat-Tarzan,” Felicity said as she shut her eyes for a moment. She licked her lips and centered herself. “Okay. I can handle this.” She took a deep breath and looked at all three of them in turn. “I know I went Little Orphan Angsty for a second but I’m good now so let’s just get this over with because I would like to get back to that good day I was having before that damn straw wandered onto my camel’s back and all hell broke loose. I figure the quickest and easiest way to accomplish that would be if you all just asked me your questions and I answer them one at a time so I can fill in any blank spots as they come up, okay? So…” she focused her attention on her brother first. “Okay, first question goes to Batman II; the Legend of Greystoke; ready, aim, fire away.”

Luke got up from the couch, his golden eyes tracing over her as his one good hand fisted at his side. He opened his mouth to speak a few times but nothing came out until finally he crossed the room in two long strides and pulled her into his chest with his one good arm, holding her to him firmly. She heard Tam make a choking noise and sob then softly perfumed arms reached for her and she was trapped between them.

“Shit,” Tim said as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other as he pushed back the fall of inky black hair off his forehead. “Aw hell,” he said then suddenly his arms were wrapping around them as well.

As the ridiculousness of the entire situation hit her from within the safe and warm sanctuary of the impromptu group hug, she began to laugh. Rich tinkling chimes of relief and release burst forth from her lips and hit the air cascading over all of them like soap bubbles until they were all laughing as one.

They stayed like that for several minutes until the laughter died down to giddy little hiccups of sound and their hold on one another released. Luke looked down at her and smiled, the shadows leaving his face, “Man, I could eat a freakin’ horse right now, couldn’t you?”

“Oh yeah,” She agreed and it was like a thousand pound weight was lifted from her shoulders.

“I could go for, like, twenty pounds of fried shrimp,” Tam said in a rush.

“I could eat a whole cow,” Tim agreed. “This emotional catharsis shit requires copious amounts of red meat, preferably on a bun with monster amounts of cheese and bacon.”

“Oh man, bacon. Yes to bacon,” Luke said, walking over to the couch and plopping down. He reached for her abandoned cup of tea, “So how do you want to play this? I say we each get a menu and start calling around until—” He took a sip then spit it out in a gush of green-brown lukewarm sludge and gagged. “What the fuck is this shit?!?”

“Yeah,” Felicity said with a wince, “it’s a special blend of rare herbs that speeds up the healing process.” She offered her brother a sympathetic look as he began wiping off his tongue with the bottom of his shirt. “You know, if you give it a chance it could help with your arm. I’ve seen that stuff heal a broken bone in a matter of days and a bullet wound in, like, less than a week or two.”

“Bullet wound?” Tam repeated, looking a bit green around the gills.

“I’d rather keep the cast,” Luke choked out as he reached for her water glass and swished it around his mouth before swallowing. “Guh!”

“Damn Felicity, when did you become such a bad-ass?” Tim asked, his bright blue eyes looking at her with open admiration.

“Why? Because I can drink manky tea that my big bad bat-brother can’t even sip without doing an
Old Faithful impersonation?” She asked with a chuckle.

“No, I mean the rest of it. What you said before, you did all that?” He asked.

Luke and Tam both turned to them, their faces betraying their own horror-laced curiosity. “Yeah, but you guys do stuff like that and more every day,” she answered, her cheeks flushing with color.

“We’ve also had training,” Tim told her. “Several years’ worth. I’ve been doing this since I was a kid and Luke studied martial arts most of his life but you’ve only been gone four years. How--?” He stopped, at a loss for words.

She thought about it, “I don’t know, I just did it. I didn’t have much of a choice with a lot of it, I just had to do it,” she said as she looked up at him. “And I have had some training.”


“Martial arts, stuff like that,” she shrugged.

“You?” Tam snorted.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Felicity asked in consternation.

“It’s just—” Tam sighed apologetically and smiled, “C’mon Baby, for years our mom made Luke and me take self-defense classes. We were always involved in one sport or another but you were never interested in that stuff. Even when our mom offered to sign you up and take you with us you said no.”

“I guess I changed my mind,” Felicity told her.

Tam looked at her skeptically, “I once tried to get you a gym membership and you made me take it back and exchange it for a gift certificate to a day spa.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Felicity said in exasperation. “Look, after you’ve been kidnapped a few times you start realizing that maybe it’s time to start getting better prepared so I asked some of the guys on Team Arrow to teach me.”

“What did they teach you?” Tim asked curiously.

“Specifically?” She frowned, “Well, a mixture of stuff really but mostly Jeet Kun Do, Krav Maga, and Jujitsu because my friend Sara thought those would work better for me since I’m so small statured and when I do have to fight it’s usually close-quarters combat. I’m trying to get into Wing Chun, and Oliver has a thing about us all learning archery even though I kind of suck at it. Diggle thought that since I was familiar with yoga techniques I would do better with Indian style martial archery disciplines like Dhanurveda rather than Kyudo but it’s been slow going. I’m also fair to middling with eskrima sticks and the Bo Staff but, believe it or not, guns are my wheelhouse. Lance, Dig, and I go to the range every weekend; it’s become kind of a thing. The first time I got all my shots center mass, Lance bought me lunch and stuck the target on his fridge; it was hilarious,” she said with a grin. “Dig even got me my own Glock with the extra extended clips afterwards then Lance got me the P99 after they got into this big debate over which one was better.”

“You own guns?” Tam asked, her jaw nearly hitting the floor.

She nodded, “A few. Like I said, I have two nine millimeters; the Baby Glock and a Walther P99, a .38 police special, and a shotgun but I left that and the revolver back in Starling,” she frowned. “I really need to call Dig and make sure he’s still sending them.”
“A Baby Glock…?” Tam repeated, looking dumbstruck.

“Yep,” she nodded again. “Although technically it’s called a Glock 26. Dig got me the Gen 4 because it came with three clips instead of two and I usually try to keep both a nine shot and a fifteen shot backup clip in my purse. Besides,” she said, wrinkling her nose slightly, “sometimes your pinky can get caught in the regular nine shot clip so it helps to use the extended one.”

“You keep it in your purse?” Tam asked her, eyebrows shooting upwards towards her hairline.

“Yeah,” she reached for her handbag and pulled it out, sliding her thumb on the release and popping out the clip before clearing the chamber and handing it to her sister. “It’s remarkably light and it fits in an evening bag like a dream even with the extra clips. Plus it has the double spring so there’s very little recoil and you can field strip it superfast. There’s not much to it, really.” She looked at it with a slight shrug. “The Glock has a lot more accessories available than the P99, but I kind of like the Walther a little more just because, well, the whole Daniel Craig/James Bond thing, y’know? Although technically he carries a PPK…”

Tam looked at the gun in her hand blankly before Tim reached over and took it away from her with a scowl, “How did you even get this on the plane?”

“Checked it with my luggage,” she told him rolling her eyes as he handed it back to her. She stuck it back in her purse and look at Tim’s expression of disapproval. “What; you thought I kept it in my purse while I was on the plane? Yeah, no. You can check it in an approved carry case but the TSA frowns on you actually keeping it on your person even with a concealed weapons permit which, by the way, I have in case you were wondering.”

“All that? Guns, martial arts…” Luke said, his eyebrows nearly raised to his hairline in surprise. “How often were you training?”

“I don’t know,” she scrunched her forehead as she thought about it. “The guys train between six to ten hours a day but since I’m on tech I only do about half that so I’d say between three and a half to four and a half hours a night during the week then more on the weekends, five to seven days a week for almost two years.” She grinned, “Plus I went from a size six to a four so, yeah for sample sales!”

“I thought you said you were just a tech,” Tam asked faintly, her jaw slack with surprise. “How often were you training?”

“Yeah, I am,” Felicity said slowly, “but I occasionally have to go in the field, too. Besides, it’s something to do between hacking into Federal databases, y’know? It’s really no big deal.” Tim and Luke exchanged looks and Tam rubbed her hand over her forehead as though she were trying to rub her brain clean.


“Baby is packing heat now,” Tim deadpanned. “Bruce is going to lose his shit when he finds out.”

“Am I the only one who feels like they just stepped through the looking glass?” Tam asked the other two stunned people in the room.

“You know, your family looks so nice and normal from the outside but you’re really not,” Tim mused aloud.

“I’m… I can’t process this on an empty stomach, so okay, food first and then interrogation,” Luke said at last.

“Agreed,” Tam said heaving a sigh as she went to retrieve the menus from the kitchen.
The four of them sat around the coffee table and began to order:

“Extra eggrolls! Oh, and those cream cheese crispy things, what are they called? Crab Rangoon!”

“Ooh, if you’re ordering sushi get a Candy Roll and extra Eel Sauce! And a Godzilla roll! Oh, and a Spicy Lover’s Roll! I love me some deep fried sushi; it’s like fancy fish sticks.”

“I don’t give a crap that it’s good for me, Tam; I’m not eating any more tofu!”

“Do they have any of those Blooming Onions?”

“Who orders Buffalo Wings and forgets to ask for Bleu cheese on the side?”

“Do they have any of those little wonton tacos? I love those things.”

“Don’t forget the slaw on the barbecue sandwiches!”

“Tell them no mayo on my burger! And no tomatoes; they’re all mushy and evil.”

“Pepperoni or veggie?”

“To cilantro or not to cilantro, that is the question.”

“Tiramisu or cheesecake? Screw it, we’ll just get both.”

“Oh my Alka-Seltzer, what have we done?” Felicity asked after they finished ordering from the last menu. “How are we going to eat all that food when it gets here?”

“I have no idea but I’m freaking starving,” Tim said, shaking his head. “Just ordering those burgers made my mouth water.”

“Would it be wrong to make a snack while we wait for the food?” Luke mused as he picked up the sushi menu again.

“I still think we should have ordered salads, too,” Tam said crinkling her nose. “Just for appearances sake; that way if anyone asks we can say we made the attempt to eat healthy.”

“There’s lettuce and tomatoes on the burgers, veggies on the pizza, and rice and seaweed with the sushi. There’s your salad right there,” Luke said wryly.

“I could go for some popcorn,” Tim offered.

“You know what I love?” Felicity said with a grin, “I love that I come from a family that eats their feelings. Go neurotic Jewish stereotypes!”

“Whoop! Whoop! Eating disorder meet high metabolism! Yeah!” Tam said giving her a high five.

“Okay, since I’m apparently banned from the kitchen you guys go get the popcorn while me and Tim wait for the food,” Luke said. “We playing for stakes or splitting the diff?”

“Okay, I’m lost,” Tim said with a confused look. “Explain please; what are we doing now?”

“Yeah, cheapskate over there came up with a spin on ‘Around The World’ a couple of years back,” Tam said, hitching a thumb at her brother.

“I’m not a cheapskate, merely a man who enjoys injecting a bit of Vegas into the evening’s
festivities,” Luke said turning to Tim. “The game is this: First person to have their food delivered has to pay for everything, if two delivery guys show up at the same time then they split it, but if three or more show up then we call sudden death and whoever ordered the food that arrives last has to reimburse everyone plus tips.”

“And I somehow wind up paying every time,” Tam said sarcastically. “I wonder how that happens? Maybe because Luke always snatches up all the menus before anyone else can then picks the ones for the restaurants closest to our building first?”

“Hey, you’re the only one with a decent paying job,” Luke replied insouciantly. “Tim and I are superheroes and, while that is a freaking cool thing to put on a résumé, it doesn’t actually pay much and Felicity is unemployed due to her lousy taste in men.”

“I’m so glad you’re at the point that you can now joke about stuff like that,” Felicity said wryly as she got up from the couch. She went over to her purse and took out Bruce’s card and threw it on the coffee table. “Consider that me conceding defeat and put it on the card.”

“Whoa, is that--?” Tim picked it up and his eyebrows drew together in confusion. “Um, Felicity? How did you get Bruce’s credit card?”

“Same place I got the wad of hundreds just in case they don’t take plastic,” she said taking out a few hundred dollar bills and tossing them on the table as well. “Some helpful advice boys: If you should choose to screw with a girl’s emotions, make sure not to leave your wallet lying around where she can find it. I might work for the good guys but that doesn’t mean I’m not above a little fiscal payback,” she told them, the line falling easily from her lips as she breezed by them on the way to the kitchen with Tam chuckling beside her.
Chapter Twenty-One

Tim and Luke looked at each other then back to the card.

“Damn,” Tim said with a slow chuckle. “Your sister is a total bad-ass.”

“Felicity didn’t steal his card,” Luke said confidently as he tossed it back down on the table.
“Dude, it’s got his name on it,” Tim pointed out.

“I don’t care,” Luke said. “Felicity gets paranoid if you eat a grape in the supermarket before paying for it.”

Tim gave him a skeptical look, “How did she get the card then?”

Luke shrugged nonchalantly, “I have no idea.”

“I repeat; your sister has turned into a total bad-ass.”

“Lifting Bruce’s card makes her a bad-ass?” Luke asked drolly.

“No, lifting Batman’s AmEx Black makes her a bad-ass. Even I wouldn’t do that and technically I’m family.”

“You’re a dumb ass,” Luke said without heat. The doorbell rang and he looked up, “Huh? That was fast.”

“I wonder why security didn’t call upstairs first?” Tim asked with a frown.

“I don’t know, man. Who cares, I’m hungry.” He snatched the card and the cash off the table, shoved them in his pocket, and headed for the door.

“You’re really using it?” Tim chuckled as he followed him to the door.

“Hell, yeah; motherfucker slept with my sister, least he can do is buy her dinner,” Luke shot back before answering the door then froze, every muscle in his body going tense.

“Luke,” Bruce said as the two men faced each other.


“Oh, I just knew tonight was going to be chock full o’ fun,” Tim breathed as he looked from one man to the other.

“I didn’t know you were back in town.”

“Now you do.”

“Maybe we should take this outside?” Tim said quietly, glancing back towards the kitchen.

“I’m not here to cause trouble, I just want to speak to Felicity,” Bruce said, his expression never wavering despite the implied threat before him.

“See, you say you’re not here to cause trouble but you talking to my sister?” Luke thinned his lips and tilted his head slightly to the side. “Yeah, that’s going to be a problem because, as far as I’m concerned, that’s the definition of trouble.”

Tim cleared his throat and turned to Bruce. “Okay, before this escalates I think maybe it would be best if you just left.”


“I’m not after a fight,” Bruce returned with equal menace.
“Really? That why my little sister has bruises all over her?” Luke asked him. “Didn’t seem to have a problem using your hands on her, what makes me so special?”

Bruce’s eyes grew even colder and he tensed. “Do you really want to go there with one arm in a sling?”

“Oh, there’s plenty I can do with one hand tied behind my back,” Luke said, taking a half step forward.

The muscles in his jaw tensed but he didn’t yield. “I understand where you’re coming from Luke and, if I were you, I’d probably have the same reaction but—“

“But what, Bruce? Tell me, how should I be reacting right now?” Luke said, moving another step forward until he was in the hall. Tim followed him, closing the door behind him so that the girls couldn’t hear. “Explain to me how I should react to finding out that a guy I thought was my mentor and friend screwed my baby sister?”

“I didn’t screw Felicity,” Bruce bit out, getting in Luke’s face as his own temper began to come to a head. “The only reason I was even down there in the first place is because I was trying to keep her safe!”

“So I saw,” Luke said, his hand balling up into a fist at his side.

Bruce’s eyes flickered for a moment. “I didn’t mean to hurt her like that and I already apologized for it.”

“Before or after you fucked her?” Luke asked right before Bruce’s fist caught him in the jaw.

Luke rolled with the punch and went down to the floor, his legs kicking out in a sweep that sent Bruce down hard. Before the older man could regain his footing Luke was on top of him, his thick thighs straddling his chest and pinning his arms as he pounded into his face with his one good fist.

Bruce lifted his legs and wrapped his calves around Luke’s throat, jerking him backward until his arms were free then caught him in the solar plexus with a power punch that left him winded as he got back on his feet. “Don’t make me hurt you, Luke,” he gritted out as the other man sprang up into a battle stance, his bad arm held tight to his stomach.


“I’m just here to talk,” Bruce repeated, keeping his distance but still obviously prepared to defend himself if need be.

“Where did you guys go? Is the food—?” Tam popped her head out of the door and gawked at the sight of her brother and Bruce in a standoff.

“Go back inside, Tam,” Tim said tersely as he practically pushed her backwards.

“What’s going on?” Felicity asked walking over and peering out the door. “What the hell?”

“Felicity—” Bruce turned his head toward her and Luke acted, his fist cutting through in an upper cut before he spun his body into a roundhouse kick that sent the other man flying.

“Whoa!” Tam exclaimed, wide-eyed.

“Luke, stop!” Felicity rushed past Tim and stepped between Bruce and her brother.
“Go back inside, Felicity,” Luke said grimly as he stalked toward Bruce who was already getting back to his feet.

“No,” she said, her tone laced with steel as she planted her hands firmly on her brother’s chest. “I’ve already had one home destroyed in a bat-brawl this week, I’d rather not see this one trashed too!”

“I’m just here to talk to her,” Bruce said, stepping toward them warily.

“So talk!” He spat out.

“Alone,” said, the grim tone of the Bat coming to the foreground.


“I’m not leaving you alone with him!” Luke shot back.

“I can handle this myself,” she told him. “You too, Tim.” She looked over at the other man. “Take Luke inside and I’ll be there in a minute.”

“You sure?” Tim asked, looking from Luke to Bruce and back to her.

“Positive,” she said, feeling the tension leave the muscles in her brother’s chest despite the anger in his expression.

“I’ll be inside if you need me,” he said to her even though his eyes never left the other man.

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him. She waited until Luke walked inside with Tam. Tim offered her one last reassuring nod before shutting the door to give them at least the semblance of privacy. She eyed Bruce up and down for a moment before speaking. “It wasn’t enough that you destroyed my entire house in a brawl back in Starling City you had to start one here too? Is this going to be a new thing for you?”

“Sorry,” Bruce said, the anger leaving his expression although the tension he felt was still apparent in the way he held himself.

“Why are you here?” She asked him.

“I thought we should talk.”

“About what?” Felicity asked. “The weather? Our shared hopes and dreams? Whether or not the Gotham Rogues make it to the Superbowl; what?”

“No, I–I talked to Queen after you left.” Bruce cleared his throat, running his hand over his slightly mussed hair.

“Oh?” She asked coolly. “You two have a bonding moment after trashing everything I own? Nice to know some good came out of that, I suppose.”

“He told me the truth about the Arrow and about what you were doing out there,” Bruce said, not rising to the bait.

“And?”

Bruce’s eyes met hers, “I’m sorry.”
“For what?” Felicity asked facetiously. “Ruining my life, destroying my home, or sleeping with me and then dumping me for a second time?”

“All three,” he said, sincerity coloring his tone despite the tension in his expression. “Look, Queen explained all of it and I just wanted to tell you that had I known what was really going on—“

She held up her hand to cut him off. “You show up after four years, take apart my entire life in a matter of days, threaten me repeatedly, and what happens? Oliver tells you the exact same thing I’ve been telling you for days and suddenly everything’s cool? Nice to hear and, by the way, fuck you very much.”

“You lied to me Felicity, how was I supposed to react?” Bruce said with a grimace.

“You weren’t supposed to react, Bruce. You were supposed to mind your own goddamn business 3000 miles away on the other side of the country where you belong!” Felicity said, anger suffusing her face with color. “My life is none of your business!”

“Your life is my business!” He told her angrily.

“Why?” She asked, throwing up her hands in exasperation. “Just tell me that; why? Why me? Because of my dad? Because I once worked for you? What makes me so special, answer me that!”

“You know why,” Bruce said tersely.

“I really don’t,” she said shaking her head. “It can’t be because of the sex because I know for a fact that you’ve fucked half the East Coast Social Registry, so why?”

“Don’t,” Bruce told her.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t call what we—it’s not just sex, Felicity.” Bruce said with quiet intensity. “It’s never been just ‘sex’ between us.”

“That’s not what you told me.”

“And I’m telling you now that no matter what I said it was never just sex,” Bruce said stepping into her personal space.

“So what are you saying, Bruce?” She asked with a mirthless laugh. “That you didn’t just screw me because I was a conveniently located warm body? That you’re in love with me? That all this was your version of sending a girl flowers?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I feel, all I know is that you’re the only person—“ He fixed his deep blue eyes to hers, his anger giving way to something else. “I don’t know what this is but it isn’t just sex for me.”

She closed her eyes, “I’m not inviting you in again, Bruce. Not again.”

“Please,” Bruce said quietly and she nearly broke but then she remembered what he had done to her and her resolve hardened.

“Please’ only works once and it’s too late,” Felicity said shaking her head, refusing to let him see her pain again. “I’m done, Bruce. I can’t do this with you, whatever this is. I can’t keep playing this stupid game of yours.”
“I understand.” He turned his head away, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, “Queen mentioned…”

“What?” She asked flatly.

“Are you and he…together?” Bruce asked quietly.

A pained laugh burst out of her throat and Felicity looked heavenward as if asking for strength, “Oh, I get it; you and Oliver shared some locker room talk after your little rendition of Fight Club and because he told you I let him into my bed during a moment of weakness now you want me again? Yeah, well, don’t bother,” she said with an edge of bitterness. “Oliver gave me the exact same speech you did after rolling out of bed so you can just move on, safe in the knowledge that apparently no one else wants me either.”

Bruce blanched, “I never said I didn’t want you.”

“I don’t care,” she said turning her back to him. “Just go.”

Bruce didn’t move. He closed his eyes and waited a moment before speaking again, this time in a far more cool and detached tone, “Queen and his associate are down a man so I’m sending Barbara there to take your spot and I’m going to ask Tim to volunteer to go with her. I need someone to run Watchtower in the meantime.”

Felicity turned and looked at him like he was crazy. “Do you honestly expect me to join you in the Batcave after all that’s happened?”

“No the Batcave, at least not the one at the Manor.” He said. “There’s a secondary Watchtower location under the Wayne Foundation Building. I rarely ever use it so it’s horribly out of date but you can upgrade the system in any way you see fit and stay in the penthouse for the duration.”

“You want to set me up in the place Page Six once referred to as ‘Bruce Wayne’s Pied a Terre of Passion’?” Felicity asked sarcastically. “And how do you suppose I explain that to my dad?”

“We’ll keep it professional,” Bruce said, his expression giving nothing away. “I’ll tell him you agreed to act as a paid consultant and that I offered you the penthouse because I never use it which, by the way, is the truth. Despite what the rags would like everyone to think, I rarely go there unless it’s an emergency. I’ll give you a generous salary and you can live there free of charge plus I’ll pay all of your expenses and supply you with any equipment you need. If we can’t get it or if you’d prefer to not go through me, you can keep the card and use that or I can have Alfred give you access to an off-shore account.”

“So let me get this straight: You want to pay me to live in your bachelor pad, take care of your ‘needs’, and you’ll give me shiny things and let me keep your credit card so I can stay occupied while you’re off doing other stuff.” She rolled her eyes, “Do you really think people won’t automatically leap to the conclusion that you’re my Sugar Daddy just because everything is, wink-wink nudge-nudge, strictly professional between us?” She asked in a voice heavily laden with sarcasm. “Why bother telling anyone I’m a ‘consultant’ when you can just say ‘hooker’ and get it over with?”

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘mistress’; hookers get paid then leave, they don’t take up residence,” Bruce shot back dispassionately. “If you don’t want to man Watchtower, fine. I’ll just let your team know that they’re on their own.”

Guilt? He’s trying to guilt me into doing what he wants? The only reason the team is down a man in
the first place is because-- Felicity gritted her teeth and counted to ten. Oh no, she thought. Now I’m pissed. Watch this, you emotional blackmailing Bat-bastard. “Fine, I’ll do it. But if I’m going to be living there then I want it understood right here and now that this is a professional relationship and that you will not enter my home uninvited, I don’t care if it’s an ‘emergency’ or not. Also, I will be paid generously, emphasis on generously. I’m talking the kind of numbers that hurt, not the little ones that just leave a tickle in the checkbook.”

“Anything else?” Bruce asked without blinking an eye.

“Yes,” Felicity said, thinking quickly. “My days are my own, sun up to sundown. I work when the Bat does and when Bruce Wayne trades in his Kevlar for a three piece suit our association ends. You have no right to ask me what I do with my time or with whom I choose to spend it.”

A vein in his forehead stood out as emotion in the form of extreme irritation returned to his expression, “Done.” It was close but not quite the reaction she was going for.

“Not yet,” Felicity said with a touch of triumph. “I saw the photo spread Gotham Living did on that little love nest of yours and there is no way in hell I’m living in some Art Deco meets black enamel and steel Modern nightmare. You’re paying to have the place redecorated, stem to stern, and if I decide to move I keep the furniture.”

“Why don’t I just sign over the deed to the building while I’m at it?” Bruce asked sarcastically. Bingo. “No, but the deed to the penthouse will do.”

He smirked at that, “You’re not serious.”

“Yeah, I think I am,” she said with a nod. “The way I see it, you owe me for forcing me to leave my home and to top it off you destroyed most of my furniture and clothes.”

“Between yesterday and today you spent over $126,000 on clothes, shoes, and handbags,” he said wryly. “I think my debt has been paid in full.”

“$126,000?” Felicity repeated, pursing her lips. “Got more bang for my buck than I thought. I should go back and get the really expensive stuff next time.” She looked him in the eye, poker face in full effect. “I want a contract and a deed drawn up that says I retain full property rights to the penthouse for the sum total of $1 and that, should I ever decide to move, you get first rights to buy back the property for full market value plus 25%.”

“I’ll give you a lease,” Bruce returned.

“Think of this as less of a negotiation and more like a divorce,” Felicity told him with a malicious twinkle in her eye. “I get the house and full custody of Watchtower Jr.”

“I’m not doing it,” Bruce snorted derisively. “I’ve been more than generous in my offer; take it or leave it.”

“Leaving it.” Without even a second’s hesitation Felicity turned to head back inside the apartment.

“There’s no way you’d risk leaving your team back in Starling a man down and without a tech,” Bruce said in an almost bored tone.

“You’re right,” Felicity said in an exaggerated manner as though finally realizing something. She tapped her finger to her chin. “I wouldn’t, would I? This is why I’m heading back inside to get dressed, call for a cab to the airport, and then heading back there; tonight.”
“Queen sent you to Gotham for a reason,” Bruce growled. “You’re blown, remember? You go back there and your freedom is forfeit.”

“I remember,” she nodded as she turned dramatically on her heel and faced him again. “The thing is, now that I’ve had time to think things through I’m not so sure he was right. In fact, I think that Isabel isn’t nearly the threat he thinks she is.”

“And if you’re wrong?” He asked, his voice dropping into a registry more in keeping with the Bat.

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes at her, “Queen won’t let you. If you show up on his doorstep he’ll just shut you out.”

She frowned, “Eh, I don’t think so. You see Bruce, your first mistake in coming here--besides thinking I would ever just cave and be grateful for your presence in my life because I’m just some pathetic former lay of yours,” at her words he started forward before clenching his teeth in a grimace, “was that we were in some sort of negotiation. We’re not. A negotiation occurs when one party has something the other one wants and vice versa. I know that there is no way in hell you would ever risk sending both Barbara and Tim to Starling unless there was something down there that you wanted. Since we both know it’s not me, that means that you’re betting that Ra’s al Ghul is going to show up on Oliver’s doorstep sooner or later and you want your people in the best position possible when that happens. What that means is that you’re the one down a tech, not Oliver, so you’re the one who needs me, not the other way around.”

“You think you’re so clever right now, don’t you?” Bruce said with a tinge of amusement despite the firm line of his jaw.

She clucked her tongue at him, “Oh Bruce, I know I am and, despite what you may think, you’re not that hard of a read.” She let that sink in before continuing. “As I was saying, your second mistake was in assuming that Oliver ran his team in the same way you run your little dictatorship; he doesn’t.” She took a bold step forward, taking a play from the Bat’s How to Influence and Intimidate Handbook, her expression one of deadly intent. “I only work for Oliver when I’m at QC, the rest of the time I’m his partner. He might wear the suit and provide the bankroll but there are three deciding members of Team Arrow and Oliver only accounts for one vote. He doesn’t get to shut me out unless Diggle goes along with it and that won’t happen. The only thing Oliver can do is put down the suit, in which case Diggle and I are perfectly capable of running the show without him which is something we’ve done before and can do again.” At that Bruce’s expression shifted, his eyes focusing on her with laser-like intensity.

That’s right, Felicity silently told him. Five months. Barbara would have confirmed that Oliver Queen was gone for five months but the Arrow was still hanging around Starling City on and off the entire time. Do the math.

“I wasn’t lying on that rooftop, Bruce; not entirely anyway. If you want to get down to brass tacks, I’m the one who runs the show down there,” her blue eyes flashed cold as ice. “Oliver and Dig are vital to the mission but not irreplaceable and if something happens to either one of them we can put a guy in the suit but finding a replacement for me is a whole different matter and they both know it. Even if I have to go completely underground I can do it. I can fake documentation in my sleep and I can get access to unlimited sources of cash and information anytime I need to, so going back to Starling isn’t really as big a hurdle for me as you’d suppose. You, on the other hand,” she tilted her head in quiet contemplation.

“The way I see it, my closing ranks with Team Arrow puts you out of the loop on the whole Ra’s al
Ghul/Starling City angle and the last thing you want to do is start a turf war with Oliver while you’re up here in Gotham. You need his cooperation and if I’m there he has no reason to make nice with you. That means that, not only do you need my help, but you need my physical presence here in Gotham for as long as it takes for that to happen.” Her lips twitched into a confident expression of superiority as she watched him seethe with anger and frustration at being caught out so easily, “Bad guys aren’t trains Bruce; they don’t run on schedules. Ra’s could show up at any minute or it could take years before he puts in an appearance. If you want me to agree to stick around for that long, you need to make it worth my while. Owning real estate sounds like putting down some pretty significant roots to me, don’t you think?” She smiled, really smiled. Not a tight angry smile, but a big fat sunny shit-eating grin that matched his deepening glower in intensity. She had him and he knew it.

“You didn’t even want to stay at the penthouse, remember?” Bruce said, unwilling to concede defeat just yet.

“That was when you owned it,” she said serenely. “Now that I own it the idea is beginning to grow on me. After all, what kind of girl wouldn’t be interested in her very own penthouse in the heart of Gotham City?”

“There is no way I’m giving you that property,” Bruce told her. “If you want to go back to your boyfriend so badly then fine, I can’t stop you.”

“Okay then,” Felicity said easily.

“I can make do without a tech, even one as talented as yourself,” he told her, his face darkening in anger.

“Didn’t say you couldn’t,” she said, turning to go back into her dad’s apartment. “Goodnight Bruce.”

He held his stubborn stance until she had her hand on the doorknob, “Wait.”

She turned to him slowly, “I’m sorry, I thought we were done here; was there something else you needed?”

His eyes were closed and she could see the frustration written all over his face. “Are you enjoying yourself?” Bruce bit out.

“A little bit,” she said with a smile. She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the wall next to the door.

“What do you really want?” Bruce asked her.

“I just told you.”

“No,” he said, his eyes zeroing in on her expression. “You’re not getting the penthouse and you know it, so what do you really want?”

“I want to know just how much your mission really means to you,” she told him. “I want you to show me just how far you’re willing to go.”

He took a step forward, his muscles tight and his countenance grim, “As far as it takes.”

“Apparently not,” she told him with a raised eyebrow then watched in amusement as he ran an agitated hand through his hair and began to pace as he pinned her with another silent glare. “Oh dear, is having to concede a significant portion of the Bat’s territory a problem for you? Doesn’t it just ping your little control freak nerves to have someone get the upper hand for once?” She clucked her
tongue and gave him a sad little pout. “Poor baby.”

“This is a joke to you?” He growled menacingly. “What is this really about? Payback? Some petty little bid for revenge?”

“No, this is me teaching you a very important lesson,” Felicity explained. “If you screw with someone then you’d better be prepared to get screwed back. Don’t worry Bruce, it only really hurts the first time.”

He rubbed his hand over his mouth and shifted his stance slightly, “Your father is CEO of Wayne Enterprises; what do you suppose he’ll say when he finds out that I ‘sold’ you the penthouse suite in the Wayne Foundation Building for those terms?”

“Nice try,” she said easily. “The Wayne Foundation is completely separate from your Wayne Enterprise holdings with you as sole shareholder, owner, and deed holder for that property. My father would never have any reason to see or have knowledge of our business transaction unless you showed it to him. Also, since the penthouse is considered separate from the Foundation and is your private residence there would be no need to disclose the sale in a public declaration of charitable holdings. If my dad asks I’ll just tell him I leased it or I used my own private investments to purchase the property rights. He has no reason not to believe me.” She smiled again and leaned forward, her voice dropping to a near whisper, “I might not have liked being an Executive Assistant but that doesn’t mean I didn’t pay attention during all those business meetings and negotiations.”

“Fine, you want to go, we’ll go,” Bruce bit out. “If I agree to this then it will be quid pro quo; I want a contract,” he demanded. “You agree to work for me for no less than five years and any escape clause goes one way; mine. If I need you to consult for any projects at Wayne Enterprises or WayneTech you will do so as a paid consultant under exclusive contract and any tech, weapons, or other intellectual properties developed while under contract are to be retained solely by me. At no time may you accept an offer of employment by any company in direct or indirect competition with Wayne Enterprises or its subsidiaries nor can you fraternize with any competitors on your off hours of which there will be none. You will be available on-call 24/7. If I choose to retain you at the end of the original contract then it will be at my discretion. If you choose not to sign a new contract then you will sign a non-compete clause which says that you cannot work for anyone else for an additional five year term. You will sign a confidentiality agreement in addition to an employment contract and if you fail to meet your end, any and all property rights will revert back to me.”

“Nope,” Felicity said, stifling a yawn. “No contract, no trotting me out with the other worker bees, and no way in hell do you ever get to even have the illusion of power over me. You only get me when the Bat does and even then you will keep your little bat-toes on your side of the fence. If I want to work for someone else, I will. If I want to invite Lex Luthor to my place for a quickie and sell him a big ass smart gun that fires bat bullets, you can’t say ‘boo’. This is a straight trade and any time I want to leave, I leave. If that leaves you in the lurch then tough shit; not my problem.”

“You expect me to agree to that?” Bruce asked flatly.

“I don’t care if you do or not,” she replied. “Like I said, you’re the only one with your hand out here, remember?”

He stuck his hands deep inside his pockets and threw her a look that would have caused any other person to flee in the opposite direction while babbling in fear. “Fine, it’s yours! Tomorrow afternoon, five o’clock, my office,” Bruce said through gritted teeth. “I’ll have the paperwork ready for you to sign and then I’ll take you over to the penthouse to show you the set up.”

She looked at him for a few seconds before letting out a sigh. “I don’t want your penthouse, Bruce,”
Felicity told him.

“What?” He asked, his expression livid.

She shrugged, “I was just messing with you.”

“You were what?” He asked in disbelief.

“Think about it,” she said with mischievous twinkle in her eye. “Why on Earth would I want a $50 million dollar penthouse? The property taxes on something like that would cripple me financially in no time.” A look flashed across his eyes and Felicity knew she had him. “The maintenance fees on it alone would be somewhere around $14,000 dollars a month.”

“Then why go through all of that then?” He burst out.

“Because you were being a dick,” she told him. “Lesson number two: Don’t be a dick.”

“Fine,” Bruce snarled. “We’ll just sign a lease then.”

“Eh, not really interested in it anymore,” Felicity said off-handedly.

“What does that mean?” He asked, looming like an avenging angel on a mission.

“Just what I said,” Felicity said absentmindedly as she turned to go back inside.

He placed a hand on her shoulder and spun her around, pinning her to the wall, “How do you expect to run Watchtower then? Unless, of course, you plan on moving into the manor or Barbara’s apartment.”

“I’m not going to work for you Bruce,” she told him. “Not from the penthouse, or the manor, or Barbara’s apartment.”

“Yes, you are!” He said through gritted teeth, “Stop. Playing. Games. I’m not in the mood.”

“Are you sure?” Felicity said languidly not the least bit intimidated.

His nostrils flared and he seemed to struggle with himself for a moment before he grabbed the back of her hair and pushed her into the wall, his mouth claiming hers in a hard, unrelenting kiss.

Her hands splayed over his broad chest as she allowed herself this one last moment of insanity. His tongue invaded her mouth as his hands travelled downwards to her hips. He gripped her backside and pulled her into his embrace so she could clearly feel him hard and ready against her.

There was a bump and a rattle of the doorknob along with the sound of raised voices in the penthouse and they broke apart, both of them turning toward the noise.

“I guess we have some eavesdroppers,” Felicity said in a surprisingly level tone even though her brain was filled with a lust induced fog.

Bruce quickly stepped away from her, obviously struggling for control. “We can’t do this here,” he said with some inscrutable emotion in his eyes. “Go get dressed and I’ll wait for you out here until Luke calms down.”

“Why?” She asked calmly, pretending as though she wasn’t just as affected by the kiss as he was.

“Because obviously we need to talk and I’d like to say what needs to be said in private,” he told her.
“I think we’ve already said everything that needs to be said, Bruce,” she told him.

“Obviously not, because you kissed me back just now and that wasn’t one-sided, Felicity.” Bruce turned away from her, rubbing the back of his neck in consternation, “You drive me—what’s wrong with you?” He rounded on her. “You agreed to run Watchtower if I conceded to your demands and I did; to all of them.” His lips tightened into a grimace, “I just don’t understand you. I know you want to do this with me, I know you want to be a part of the mission--!” his eyes narrowed on her and his focus shifted, “I told you that I wasn’t interested in a relationship so you’re trying to punish me, is that it? I never would have imagined you’d be so childish and desperate that you’d stoop so low as to pull a stunt like this.”

She arched an eyebrow at him, “Believe it or not Bruce, you’re not as great a catch as you seem to think you are. I was mad, yes, but not because of that. I was more upset by the tone than the content but that’s neither here nor there. The fact is that I’ve done the vigilante thing for years now and I’m ready to move on with my life. I actually have a few job prospects lined up and I’d like to pursue them. It’s a bit hard to hold down a full time job when you’re up all night hacking, running code, and monitoring communications for a bunch of masks. You and Oliver might be able to live off of catnaps and coffee but I’d like to avoid premature aging and insanity due to prolonged sleep debt.”

“You expect me to believe any of that?” He said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I don’t care if you do or don’t, the fact is that I’m ready for a life away from all this.” She didn’t have to fake her sincerity on that one, it was true. “I already have a few prospects lined up, in fact.”

“With who? What companies?”

“Why would I tell you that?” She asked with a soft chuckle. “So you can sabotage any chance I might have? Not hardly.”

“I’ll double any salary they offer, I’ll even triple it if you like, but we both know that you’ll never settle for an ordinary life,” Bruce said confidently.

“It’s not about the money, Bruce,” Felicity said scrubbing her hands through her hair that had come loose from her messy ponytail and stretched. His eyes went straight to the neckline of her camisole and zoomed in on the fact that she didn’t bother with a bra. “It’s about quality of life.”

“Quality of life’, huh?’” Bruce repeated, his eyes following her as she moved to lean against the wall again and folded her hands over her chest to stave off the chill in the hallway. She watched as he observed the slight bounce of her unbound breasts under the thin material of her shirt. He cleared his throat and scowled, “Cut the crap, Felicity; just tell me what you want and let’s settle this.”

“Why do you need me to do it?” Felicity asked him with a curious tilt of her head. “Alfred can run Watchtower, can’t he?”

“No,” Bruce bit out losing his temper again, “but you already knew that plus you’re one of Watchtower’s programmers. You can keep up with the system, work code and hack as you go; at best Alfred can just monitor the coms but he can’t do what you and Barbara do. Look, what it comes down to is if you don’t agree to run Watchtower I can’t send Barbara to Starling, period. Ra’s and the League are coming for Queen and his crew and you need your people safe just as much as I need my people there. In the meantime though, I still need someone monitoring channels in Gotham.” His focus narrowed on her again, “Unless you really are still thinking about going back to Queen?”

She shook her head, “Like I said, I’m over the vigilante thing. I was over it before I even left Oliver which is one of the reasons I quit. All I want now is a career and a chance at a normal life.”
“A normal life?” He scoffed at the possibility of that being the truth again. “With marriage and babies and dinner by seven every night? I don’t think so.”

“Why not?” She challenged.

“Because it’s a load of bullshit and you know it!” He said with a short bark of laughter.

She frowned, “No, seriously, why can’t I meet someone and have all that? Not that I want that necessarily, nothing wrong with it either way, but why is that bullshit? Do you think I’m somehow defective or something?”

“You aren’t built for that life and even if you were you already know you won’t get it from me or anyone else you have your sights set on.” The timbre of his voice lowered to a darker and more seductive level and he stepped close enough to her that she could feel his body heat through her clothes. “And since Queen is out of the running we both know who that leaves, don’t we?”

Her lips quirked upwards, “I do but I have a feeling you don’t.”

“Meaning?” Bruce proffered.

She just smiled enigmatically knowing that it would bug the shit out of him later. “Fine, I will temporarily help you with Watchtower as long as Alfred agrees to start learning the system. You can teach him, I don’t expect to have that much time on my hands.”

“Alfred has his own duties to see to,” Bruce said shaking his head. “Other than the occasional shift he can’t man Watchtower every single night.”

“What a coincidence, neither can I,” Felicity said sarcastically.

“I don’t have all night, Felicity,” Bruce grimaced. “Out with it.”

“Fine Bruce, I’ll man Watchtower but there will be conditions.”

“Naturally,” he said sardonically, “What now? You want me to sign the manor over to you? Empty my bank accounts? I know,” he said, snapping his fingers, “you want me to give you your ‘normal life’ and get down on one knee after asking your father for your hand in marriage. We’ll have a spring wedding and make lots and lots of babies; twins, and we’ll give them cute little names like Chrysanthemum and Churchill.”

“That was a pretty detailed foray into the absurd, Bruce,” Felicity said with a superior lift of her brow. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

“Not hardly,” he threw back in an unamused tone.

“I won’t live under your roof, Bruce. This is a temporary arrangement so I’ll just commute for now.”

“I need you on-site,” he told her. “That means you stay at the manor, the penthouse, or Barbara’s place.”

She thought about it for a moment, “Fine, the penthouse, but you pay all my expenses plus everything else you offered,” she paused for drama. “No, I did not forget the offer you made to pay me a generous consultancy fee or the unlimited toy budget. I will, however, be accepting a job soon and I can’t be your 24/7 tech girl so there will be a schedule and you will adhere to it. Also, I need regular days off.”
“What for?” Bruce asked with a frown.

Felicity blinked at him, “Because I don’t intend to spend the rest of my life as a background character in Vigilante World, that’s why. I’d like to be able to let the person I’m seeing know that I can be available to go out on a date occasionally without running it past you first.”

“What person?” He snorted. “You’ve been back in town for all of two days.”

“Oh Bruce, you’d be surprised at what a girl can get up to in just a matter of days.”

That wiped the smug look off his face and his jaw clenched, “What kind of schedule?”

“I’ll give you prime hunting hours; 10 pm until 3 am Monday through Friday with weekends off.”

He shook his head, “Unacceptable; I work Gotham until close to dawn seven days a week. I need you on coms from at least 9 pm until 5 am, sometimes later.”

“Tell Alfred to work the swing shift then because I need at least five solid hours so I can function at a job and take care of sleep debt on the weekends.”

“Did Queen work those hours?” He demanded. “I doubt you complained about sleep debt with him.”

She fixed him with a hard eye, “I was his EA, I made his schedule for him. If I needed a nap then then I took it. Plus, you’re not him; any concessions I made in Oliver’s situation do not apply to you.”

“If you want a job I can get you a job; naps included,” he said, completely unmoved.

“Pass.” She said sweetly.

He tightened his mouth in frustration before answering, “Fine, I’ll try to accommodate you but, as someone once told me, bad guys don’t run on schedules. If I need you, you’re there, understood?”

“That’s reasonable,” Felicity said. “But if I think you don’t need me I’m logging off, understood? And when I tell you I’m down for the night or I need time you give it to me, no questions asked.”

“We’ll revisit it,” Bruce said stubbornly.

“Not negotiable.”

“Best I can do,” Bruce told her. “I’ll try but I can’t promise you something like that.” At her silence he sighed, “Ask me for something I can do and I’ll give you that but I can’t guarantee you a schedule.”

“Well,” she said, appearing to mull it over, “even though I’m really not excited about the idea of that penthouse of yours I suppose I could accept your offer of the decorator.”

“My offer?” He snorted. “Whatever, fine; I’ll even let you keep the furniture. I’d already planned on replacing your belongings and had your things delivered to the penthouse from your old place yesterday.”

“I told them to deliver them here,” Felicity said with a scowl.

“My company, my instructions,” he said unapologetically.
‘Whatever,’” Felicity rolled her eyes, uninterested in fighting over it. “There’s one more thing.”

“Name it,” he told her.

“Access to my bed is not a part of the deal,” she said with a confident bearing. “If I take money from you it’s because you’re paying me to be your tech, not a call girl, understood?”

His expression slammed shut and he surged forward, his mouth drawn into a grim line, “I’ve never treated you like a call girl and you know it.”

“And I’m telling you that I won’t be manhandled and your money doesn’t buy you those kinds of services,” she told him succinctly. “Even if I really do decide to hook up with Sexy Lexie, my personal life is my own and you are not a part of it.”

“Sexy Lexie?” He asked, a spark of amusement in his expression battling with the tense line of his jaw.

“You know what they say about bald men,” Felicity drawled. “I might have to find out if it’s true for myself.”

“You have a type, Baby, and Lex doesn’t fit the bill,” Bruce said in a sexy undertone.

“I don’t know; older billionaire with a dark side?” She pointed out. “Sounds about right.”

“I’m not worried,” he told her, stepping a bit closer.

“Oh?” She asked coolly.

“I don’t need to force my way into your bed, Baby,” Bruce rumbled in a low tone. “Whether you admit it or not, you want me just as much as I want you but I’m willing to play it your way for now.”

His voice took on a sensual timbre, “The next time I take you it will be at your invitation.”

“Consider yourself uninvited then,” she said laconically.

“Are you sure about that?” His voice took on a languorous quality as he moved closer, his eyes dipping to the thin material of her top and her unbound breasts, trailing up to her lips before ending their journey by catching her gaze with his own.

“Do you want to take me to bed, Bruce?” Felicity purred, a seductive smile on her lips.

“Always,” he said, his lips stopping just a hairsbreadth from hers, his arms leaning against the wall on either side of her.

“Good,” she breathed into his mouth. “You needed to learn how to deal with disappointment sometime.” She pushed him away with her fingertips and stepped out of the cage of his arms to touch the doorknob to the penthouse, “I’ll see you tomorrow at 9 am at the Wayne Foundation Building.”

“I have meetings scheduled in the morning,” he scowled, the Bat replacing the lover at breakneck speed.

“Cancel them,” she told him. “Consider it the first in a long line of concessions you’ll be making from here on out,” Felicity said imperiously.

“Fine, I’ll start making a few concessions if you will as well,” he told her.

“Like what?”
He looked down at her, his mouth drawn in a tight line, "Like the fact that I need to be able to trust you to act as a team out there. That means you have to get over your anger and stop treating me like the enemy."

"If I act like I can’t trust you it’s because you haven’t given me a reason to," she told him.

He nodded, "Okay, I’ll grant you that one. I guess a lot of this is my fault, most of it in fact." He looked at her again, his eyes softer and more sincere than she had seen in a long time. "I’m sorry for what…for what’s happened between us." He frowned and shifted his weight a little, "I’m not used to apologizing to anyone but I really am sorry. I never meant to hurt you and..” he took a breath, "I want this to work, Felicity. I want to work with you, share the mission. I don’t want to fight anymore."

Felicity felt her anger melt a little and grumbled, "If you can make the effort then so can I, I suppose." He grimaced and she sighed wearily, "Look, I’ll try, okay, but I need you to start listening to me. Really listen. I know that you’re used to being the boss but I’m used to being someone’s partner. My team trusts me and I trust them. If I tell you something then I need to know you won’t shut me out or make a power play to reassert your dominance or some other crap! I need to know that you can treat me like an equal. I don’t mind following your lead but if you want us to really work together you have to stop treating me like I can’t think for myself or that I’m incapable of taking care of myself."

"That’s not easy for me," Bruce said reluctantly.

“Learn,” she told him firmly. “Tomorrow I’ll do my best to make a fresh go of it but tonight I still need to process all of this. I’m still really, really pissed off about everything that’s happened. I still can’t believe that you and Luke—“ She stopped, took a moment to center herself, then exhaled. “Okay, I’m letting that go now. It’s done. If you can keep it in the past then I’ll try too, okay? Tomorrow though, today I get to be as pissy and vindictive as I want to be."

“Pissy and vindictive, huh?” Bruce asked, quirking a smile. “If you were really pissy and vindictive you would have nailed me at least a couple of times with those toasters and potted plants.”

“Almost got you with the wine bottle,” she pointed out with a raised eyebrow. “Probably ruined that sweater of yours too. Pretty pissy and vindictive of me, I’d say.”

“Guess I won’t push my luck then.” Bruce smiled a little and nodded as he made a move toward the elevators. “I’ll see you tomorrow. By the way,” he said, pulling something from his jacket pocket and tossing it to her. “Your phone and something for your good buddy, Lex.”

She caught the weighted bag handily, refusing to react to his pointed sarcasm since she knew exactly what was in the bag. Instead she reached into the sack and pulled out the lube. She tossed it to him and he caught it midair without even thinking about it. “That’s for you. Lex and I won’t need it but now that I’ve seen your negotiation skills in action I figure you could use the relief.”

At that moment the bell to the private elevator dinged and four delivery people emerged with several boxes of food between them. Bruce glanced over at them as they began to approach.

“Pissy and vindictive,” he said dryly as he pocketed the lube and headed for the elevator, his eyes still locked on hers as the doors shut. As soon as the doors to the elevator closed, the door to her dad’s penthouse opened and the three stunned and somewhat impressed expressions of her companions were revealed. Tim and Luke quickly paid the deliverymen and Tam pulled Felicity into the foyer while the men handled the multiple boxes and bags of food.
“Holy shit!” Tam breathed; eyes bright and face alight in stunned amazement.

“So I take it you were all listening in on that?” Felicity asked dryly.

“Dude!” Tim marveled as he stepped in behind them with a large box of food balanced in one arm and several bags dangling from the other. “Your sister really is a total—”

“Bad-ass,” Luke finished for him as he shook his head. “Damn Felicity, all I was planning on doing was roughing him up a little; you practically ripped his balls off and shoved them down his throat.”

“And then made him say ‘thank you and may I please have some more’!” Tim crowed.


“I can’t believe you just totally screwed Bruce like that and then literally tossed him a bottle of lube,” Tim said in amazement. “It was like the culmination of every fantasy I have ever had!”

She shook her head at them, “Not that I don’t appreciate your concern, but did you really have to watch us from the peephole?”

“Yup, plus we kept the door cracked so we could hear better,” he said with a weird expression on his face as he poked her on the shoulder with his finger.

“Stop it!” Felicity said, batting his hand away. “What are you doing?”

“I’m just checking to see if you’re real and not some kind of amazing dream I never want to wake up from.”

Felicity sighed, “You do realize that this means that you have to go help my team in Starling now, right?”

Tim shrugged, “That’s cool, doesn’t matter to me. I was planning on heading back to Bludhaven tomorrow anyway. One city is just as good as another.”

“Are you going to be okay with Tim being 3000 miles away?” She asked Tam.

She chuckled, “Girl, I work for Wayne Entertainment; I’m on the West Coast every other week! We’ll probably see each other a hell of a lot more now that he’ll be there and not in Bludhaven, the scum-sucking capital of the world.”

“Hey, I might actually be able to get a tan,” Tim said cheerfully.

“Look, can we talk and eat at the same time?” Luke asked, jostling some of the food.

“Let’s eat!” Tim said as they all filed into the TV room. “You can fill me in on the details of your team over heartburn.”

Later that night when she laid in her bed she finally got around to worrying about the logistics of everything.

As much as she’d like to pretend that Bruce no longer affected her, he did. She’d felt that kiss in her bones and she knew that he knew it, too. It was just a matter of time before close quarters and unresolved sexual tension came to a head and then she’d be in the same situation all over again.
“I am not a doormat,” Felicity told herself out loud as she stared up at the ceiling. “I will not have sex with that man no matter what.” She sighed and rolled onto her side, “Oh who am I trying to kid?”

She was going to ride that man like a mechanical bull the first chance she got. Speaking of which…

Felicity reached into the white paper sack on her bedside table, popped the Plan B in her mouth before tossing the packaging in her wastepaper basket and took a sip of water from her water bottle. She then tossed the bag and its contents back on top of the nightstand. “One less thing to worry about at least.”

She slumped back into her pillows and glanced at her clock. It was still pretty early. Tam, Luke, and Tim were still up and watching TV in the lounge but she just hadn’t been in a company kind of mood.

“Hey,” Tam said, opening her bedroom door a crack.

“Hey,” she said back.

Tam walked over to her bedside and fished the pastel colored packaging out of the trash. “$49.99 plus tax?”

“Yup,” Felicity said morosely. “And worth every penny.”

Tam tossed it back in the wastebasket with a frown, “Why did they decorate the package in pastels if it’s supposed to prevent pregnancy? Isn’t that like the worst marketing idea ever? Damn thing looks like it should come with a free pair of baby booties.”

“I don’t know,” Felicity said dryly. “Maybe because they think people with uteruses can’t handle primary colors?”

Tam seemed to consider that for a moment, “That or they thought a picture of a baby bump with a line drawn through it might be too obvious?” She snorted, “Personally I’d buy it but, hey.” She lay down beside her in the bed forcing Felicity to scoot over to give her room. She settled into the pillow and rolled over so she was facing her, “I meant to ask, can I move in with you?”

“Yes, you’ve already stolen my pillow and my side of the bed, why not?” Felicity snorted.

“No, I meant into the penthouse,” she said.

“You already have the condo Dad bought you,” Felicity frowned.

“So?” She asked, “That penthouse has like five or six bedrooms, what do you care? Plus my condo board doesn’t allow pets. If I move in we can get a tiny little doggie together! Maybe a Lhasa Apso, or a Yorkie, or one of those teeny tiny little poodles people stick in coffee mugs so they can post it on Facebook?” She made a little gesture with her hands, “We can dress it in cute little sweaters and do its hair and buy it tiny little accessories; a cute widdle puppy with a tiny widdle smooshy face. You know you’re dying for one, right?”

“Tiny what? And who’s going to housebreak it?” Felicity asked muzzily.

“Tim,” she said easily. “He’ll also walk it and do all the other gross poopie stuff we don’t want to do.”

“Tim’s not even housebroken! Besides, he’s going to be in Starling City, remember?”
“We’ll hire a maid and a dog walker, I’ll pay! Please! Pretty please! Please let me live in your penthouse!” Tam begged, her hands folded in supplication.

“Fine!” Felicity said wearily. “If you can figure out how I’m going to work with Bruce and not wind up in bed with him only to get my heart stomped for a third time then you can move in and get as many dogs as you like. Smoosh all the little widdle faces you want to all day long.”

“Can’t you just sleep with him and not get your heart broken?” Tam said easily.

“I doubt it,” Felicity said morosely.

Tam grabbed the paper sack off the vanity and peered inside before pulling out the XL labeled condoms and grinned at her, “Are you sure?” She teased, dangling the box between her fingers.

“I don’t think I can do this,” Felicity said, not even cracking a smile.

“Sure you can,” Tam told her. “It’s like riding a bike.” She winked, “A very well hung bike.”

She snorted, “Not that, I mean work with Bruce again and not get hurt.”

“God, you’re bringing me down,” Tam moaned dropping the condoms on the bed between them and burying her face in the pillow.

“I’m sorry if my life is making you upset,” Felicity said sarcastically.

“What’s the big deal?” She asked without looking up. “He wants you, you want him, I say hop on top and enjoy the moment.”

“I can’t, and I don’t think I can work with him without that happening again either,” Felicity said miserably.

“But you have to!” Tam said, lifting her head from the pillow.

Felicity sighed resignedly, “Because of the mission and the fact that it’s the right thing to do?”

“No, because I really want a dog.”

There was a knock at the bedroom door and Tim stuck his head inside with his eyes tightly shut, “Is everybody decent?”

“Unfortunately,” Tam said sulking.

“Damn,” Tim said in consternation as he opened the bedroom door the rest of the way.

“What are you doing in here anyway?” She asked, shaking her head at her boyfriend.

“Luke went to bed early and it felt weird being the only one in the TV lounge,” Tim told them. “Got room for another in there?”

Tim plopped down between them and Felicity huffed as she was forced to the outer edge of the bed. “You know, a few boundaries would be nice every once in a while,” she groused.

“What’s got you so crabby?” Tim asked. “You just handed Bruce his ass out there; you should be celebrating not holed up in here bringing down the mood.”

“Thank you!” Tam said, hugging him tightly and kissing his cheek. “I knew there was a reason I
loved you; I told her almost the exact same thing just before you walked in here.”

“No you didn’t,” Felicity said with a frown. “You said I should sleep with Bruce and basically chuck my self-respect out the window.”

“What is--?” Tim squirmed on the bed and pulled the now crushed box of condoms out from behind him. “I really didn’t need to know this about Bruce,” he said reading the label.

“Felicity said she can’t be a kick-ass vigilante anymore and she wants to give Bruce back our penthouse,” Tam pouted, burying her head in his chest.

Tim wrapped his arm around her and turned to Felicity with a scowl. “No! No way! You can’t do that after you—” He paused, “Wait, did she say our penthouse?” He looked at Felicity hopefully.

“No.” Felicity told him.

“Damn,” he breathed, his brows drawing together in consternation.

“Tim,” Tam said in a whiny little girl voice. “Make her have sex with your dad again so I can live in his penthouse and get a little doggie!”

“I don’t even want to think about Bruce and---! Wait, we could get a dog, too?” Tim looked to her again.

“No!” She said, throwing her arms up in exasperation.

“Well, that sucks,” he said grumpily. “I always wanted a dog. All we had at the manor were stupid bats and you can’t pet those things without the risk of rabies.”

“Tim, the practical stuff, the logistics of me living there and working with Bruce just doesn’t add up!” She heaved an aggravated sigh. “Right about now Bruce is realizing he has me over the barrel and the minute I cave and give in to him he’s going to wind up stomping my heart all over again.”

“So don’t let him,” Tim said blithely. “Bruce bulldozes over everyone around him and we all cave because he’s so damn relentless it usually isn’t worth it, but you didn’t let him beat you out there. You won. You laid a smack-down on his ass and made him see what it’s like for the rest of us. You aren’t really going to give that up, are you? Because he wins whether you stay and cave or whether you run away and hide; either way, he knows he has that power over you.”


Tam plopped down beside Tim, “Ugh! Your life sucks and you’re dragging me down with you!”

Tim shook his head at the two of them. “The problem with the two of you is that you aren’t thinking this through.”

“No duh, how do you think I got into this mess to begin with?” Felicity said, lying back until she and her sister were side by side with Tim between them, their matching expressions a fitting representation of doom and gloom.

“What does Bruce hate more than anything?” Tim asked them, arching one eyebrow haughtily.

“Commitment,” Felicity said.

“Casual Friday,” Tam said at the same time.
“Not being in control,” Tim corrected them. He turned on his side, punching the pillow so that he was comfortable before speaking again, his mouth relaxed in a gentle smile. “Bruce hates not having control. He cares about you, probably a lot more than he wants to and it scares the crap out of him. It makes him feel out of control so he pushes you away because suddenly he doesn’t hold the power position, you do. He’s playing push me/pull me because a part of him thinks that if he keeps you off-balance then that means he’s in control and he won’t stop until you stop him and the only way to do that is to break him of the habit and show that, no matter what crap he pulls, you aren’t falling for it.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Felicity asked.

“You just did; out there just a while ago,” Tim told her. “You took control and he let you. He fought it but once he realized that you weren’t going to let him roll all over you he relented. Once you recognize that, you also begin to realize that the only thing that bothers him worse than when people don’t do what he wants is when they ignore him altogether.”

“What do you mean?” Felicity asked and both she and Tam looked at him with interest. “I tried ignoring him and it didn’t do any good. He just showed up and--”

“Kissed you so hard it made the doorknob sweat,” Tam finished for her.

“First off, I did not need that imagery; secondly, I don’t mean ‘ignore’ as in ‘not pay him attention’, I mean total apathy.” He told them. “You got him good tonight and it’s bugging the shit out of him right now. He’s out there on some rooftop deciding on strategies and formulating protocols even as we speak and tomorrow morning, bright and early, he’ll call his secretary and cancel every meeting he has just so he can be at the door to his penthouse waiting to spring a trap on you and show you that, even if you think you got one over on him, he’s still the one in control.”

“And?” Tam prompted him, lifting her head from the pillow and rolling onto her side to face him.

“Think about it,” he told them. “Bruce has been stewing over this all night long, he’s got plans within plans, he’s figured out every angle, he’s determined to regain control over the situation; what is the one thing you can do that will completely throw him off his game?”

“Hand me the phone,” Felicity said as she finally got it.

“What are you going to do?” Tam asked as Tim handed her the cell.

“Hold on,” Felicity said as she looked for the name she’d added to her contact list just before she decided to go to bed. The phone began to ring and she waited.

“Hello?”

“Hi, it’s Felicity. I’m not calling too late, am I?”

“No,” Jake said. “I’m usually up pretty late actually. You don’t need an on-call hero already do you?” He teased.

“Not exactly,” she said, “I, um, I was just wondering if you were serious about doing something later?”

“Yeah, absolutely,” Jake said brightly. “When?”

“Anytime really,” she said.

“How about lunch tomorrow? Your dad has meetings all afternoon so he won’t need me until he’s
“ready to leave for the day barring any last minute change of plans.”


“Any time after 11:30 works for me.”

“I have to be in the area in the morning so why don’t I just swing by Wayne Enterprises around that time and we can take it from there?”

“Sounds like a plan,” he told her in his warm honey and whiskey drawl. “See you then Miss Felicity Fox.”

“See you, Jake. Goodnight.” She hung up the phone and Tam squealed in delight from her side of the bed.

“Oh my God!” Tam laughed. “I can’t believe you just did that!”

“Wait, did you just play Bruce?” Tim said in shock.

“No, I didn’t ‘play’ Bruce, I just made a lunch date with someone.” She arched her eyebrow at him, “Besides, isn’t that what you just told me to do? Throw him off his game by showing him that he can’t manipulate my emotions whenever it’s convenient.”


“So who’s Jake?” Tam asked.

“Dad’s security officer.”

“Oh yeah, he’s yummy!” Tam goggled. “Ooh, that’s going to drive Bruce out of his skull.”

“Yeah, but that’s beside the point,” Felicity said dismissively. “I need to break the pattern and going to lunch with a nice, normal guy is a good place to start, right Tim?”

“Hmm?” Tim responded faintly, his expression troubled, “Oh, uh, yeah sure.”

“What’s wrong with you,” Tam asked him.

“Nothing,” Tim said quickly, “It’s just…”

“Just what?” Felicity asked.

“Well,” Tim cleared his throat nervously, “Aren’t you, like, using this Jake guy?”

“No,” Tam said, smacking him on the arm.

“Ow!” He said, rubbing his bicep, “I just meant that it seems like you might be giving this guy the wrong impression.”

“What do you mean, ‘wrong impression’?” Felicity frowned again. “He asked me to call him if I ever wanted to do something and I did; how is that giving him the wrong impression? I’m having lunch with him, not making a life-long commitment under false pretenses.”

“Yeah,” Tam said, giving him a dirty look of her own. “And besides, it’s not like she’s dating Bruce; he dumped her remember? Twice; and then he showed up again right afterwards expecting to get into her cookie jar like that was okay or something. If some guy tried that shit with me his balls
would be aching. You, yourself, basically told Felicity to move on. You said to show Bruce total apathy by not letting him have his way so isn’t going to stress-free lunch with a nice normal guy a good start in the right direction?”

“I said all that?” Tim asked then cleared his throat, “Oh yeah, I did. Sure. That was a…good plan of mine,” He said faintly before picking up the box of condoms holding up them to her gaze, “Well, since you aren’t going to use them mind if Tam and I take them home with us?”

“Tam honey, are you sleeping over tonight?” Lucius said as he opened the door then froze as he saw Tim holding a large box of condoms and in bed with both of his daughters.

“Hi Daddy!” Tam waved at him.

“Timothy,” Lucius intoned, his face a mask of disapproval.

“Mr. Fox,” Timothy said as he scrambled out of bed tossing the condoms behind him and quickly got to his feet. “Sir,” he added.

Lucius took a moment to look from both his daughters who were still lying on the bed to the nervous young man standing in front of him. “Tim, son, why don’t you say goodnight to the girls then come see me in my office,” he ordered with another hard look before he shut the door behind him.

“Um, yes (gulp) sir.”
Chapter Twenty-Two

With Bruce she always had to be on top of things, always thinking ahead and making strategies and the following morning was no exception. Waking early she dressed very carefully in something that was both acceptable for a lunch date and would fill her with confidence with Bruce. She’d decided to automatically discard anything she had bought with Bruce’s card from her wardrobe options. It just seemed fundamentally wrong to go on a date with someone in a dress another man paid for, sort of like putting bad juju on the date before it ever happened, so she had to make do with what she had from her own greatly diminished wardrobe. Looking through her garment bags she had found a pretty A-line floral print dress in pale silk georgette and paired it with a pink cardigan and a low pair of matching heels. The floral pattern was silkscreened giving it a Japanese watercolor look that was very feminine but not too dressy in case Jake wanted to go somewhere casual. She also liked the fact that while it showed some cleavage it was still very lady-like and ended just at her knees so she knew Peggy wouldn’t fuss when she saw her later.

She kept her makeup light and simple and put her hair up in a half ponytail so it was out of her face but the rest of it hung long and loose down her back. She debated leaving on the glasses. She had contacts and they were fine, but the glasses were her armor. Tam had gotten rid of hers as soon as she was old enough for Lasik and Lucius had offered to get her eyes done as well but she had refused. There was just something a little too Clockwork Orange about the whole process and she didn’t mind her glasses that much. They gave her something to fiddle with when she was nervous.

She stood in front of the mirror and played ‘leave them off or on’ for a few minutes until she just gave up and left them on her nose. She might need the reassurance today and the heavy frames were her security blanket.

Although they had agreed on a truce she knew she would still have to be on her toes with Bruce. He was like a puppy that you had to train to not keep peeing in the same corner and, no matter how often you put down papers and patted his nose; he’d keep coming until one of you gave up. Well, she was determined to housebreak the Dark Knight, no matter how many times she had to keep swatting him down, until he got the message. The best way she knew to do that was to keep him just a little off-balance by demonstrating some of the mad skills that made her an asset to Team Arrow until he finally figured it out for himself. Whenever Bruce was in the mix the best policy was to have as much prep time as possible so she caught a cab and arrived at the Wayne Foundation just after dawn. Luckily, as she was Lucius Fox’s daughter, the security guard didn’t argue with her when she asked to go up to the top floor and even used his code key to allow her to access it without her having to ask. When she got there she noticed the keypad and grinned before pulling out her handy
card hacker app and opened the door in no time flat.

“One would think Batman would have better security,” she chuckled under her breath before stepping inside. Of course, that wasn’t entirely fair. The key pad was state of the art and required a seven digit access key; it just wasn’t good enough to stop her. Still, biometrics would have been better but probably harder to explain to whatever business associate or bimbo happened to stop by.

When she got inside the large penthouse the first thing she noticed were the huge banks of floor to ceiling windows and sliding glass doors to the large balcony and that over looked the Gotham skyline. The early morning sun peeked over the buildings in the distance, the light reflecting off the shiny gold-flecked artwork that was interspaced between more modernist black leather and steel furnishings. The focal point of the large reception room (other than the huge stone fireplace she could probably stand up in) was the elaborately carved and mirrored bar that was stocked with enough high-end liquor to fuel a millionaire’s St. Paddy’s Day parade.

As she walked inside she felt the hairs on the back of her neck begin to rise as though there were someone waiting in the shadows. Turning her head cautiously, she caught sight of an Egyptian bust of a male figure whose gold and turquoise painted eyes bored into her own. It was unnaturally life like despite the gold leaf and azure paint, the effect made even more chilling by the fact that it was basically a decapitated head on a mount. She stood in front of it and looked at it curiously. She moved around it, circling carefully, before leaning in until their noses almost touched. “Okay, I know how to fix you.” Felicity unbuttoned her olive-green military-style fitted coat and draped it over the bust. “Better.”

She walked more fully into the room and frowned because, as far as she could see, her stuff wasn’t there. “I distinctly heard Bruce say he had my stuff delivered here.” she told herself out loud, and shivered slightly as her voice echoed off the almost cavernous walls of the penthouse.

She turned her head and was nearly slapped silly by a large Max Le Verrier bronze of a walking panther. The animal’s mouth was open and the sunlight played over its sleek lines and created shadows on its face that made it look like it was stalking her. “Nice kitty,” she said to it. “Creepy kitty. Who did Bruce hire to decorate this place, Morticia Adams?” Seriously, if she was going to go Deco she would have done something in keeping with the Scottish Symbolists; bright colors and stained glass, not Scooby Doo-esque artwork with eyes that follow you and a theme straight out of Death on the Nile. She shivered and decided to get away from the dead people heads and man-eating bronzes for a while.

She headed back toward the bedrooms and opened the first door she came from. There, in the center of the room, were all her worldly possessions.

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

Three racks of clothes, two large boxes marked ‘BOOKS’, three more marked ‘MISC’, and another marked ‘LINENS’, and the chifforobe from her bathroom.

“One piece of furniture. Seriously, one piece,” she shook her head and shut the door behind her in disgust.

“Oh, he’s going to pay for that one,” she muttered as she glared at the furnishings throughout the rest of the place as she explored her new living space. Art Deco Modern had its place and, while she wasn’t necessarily a fan, she could appreciate some of the artwork and furniture that cluttered the penthouse but the overall effect of The Great Gatsby meets The Adams Family was just too overwhelming. It looked like someone crammed every kind of 1920’s to 1940’s interwar period piece they could into every nook and cranny, the creepier the better, and figured that it would work
together when all it did was give the place a high-end mausoleum vibe. She could definitely see why Bruce didn’t spend a lot of time there.

Finally she found the office and began to relax. “Now this is more like it,” she said. Although this room was done in Art Deco as well, it was much more understated. She paused to admire the large dark bured wood desk with its curved and sharp lines highlighted by subtle gold leaf along with the other oversized and heavy furniture scattered throughout the room. All were made from highly polished wood that smelled of beeswax and time and were an eclectic mix of intricately carved pieces with an Oriental feel to the stark, clean lines that defined the period. Elegant, classic, and masculine; one could almost see Agatha Christie’s pompous protagonist, Hercule Poirot, having his tea by the fire as he exercised his ‘little grey cells’ along with his appreciation for the finer things in life.

A quote from Poirot’s ‘The Affair at the Victory Ball’ popped in her head and it was so Bruce and so in keeping with the moment that she had to say it out loud, “Because the devil himself dances among us, but we do not see him.”

This was the one room she could see herself relaxing in. There were carved bookcases filled with leather bound volumes that reached from floor to ceiling and thick antique Oriental rugs piled one on top of the other. The effect was less cluttered and busy and more ‘something to keep your feet warm and toasty as you sat in front of the fireplace with a good book’.

“And speaking of the devil,” she murmured. The fireplace itself was small but cozy looking, surrounded by elegantly painted tiles and a dark mahogany mantle that was artfully cluttered with bits and bobs that she knew were less ‘decor friendly’ and more personal.

She picked up a silver framed photograph of a young Bruce at Manor with his mother in the rose garden and smiled before returning it to its place. There were other silver frames here and there, all of his parents, Alfred, or of him as a child but none after the age of eight. She knew that because in each and every picture he was smiling, a real genuine smile of childish joy and innocence. She’d seen Bruce smile, of course, but not like that. Not anymore.

She looked up at the portrait of Martha Wayne that hung above the mantle and sighed. “She was so young, wasn’t she? I always forget how young they were when you lost them.” She glanced back down at the photo of Bruce and his parents again. She knew he was around eight years old when he lost them. “She was, what, twenty-five? Twenty-six?”

Her own mother had only been twenty-three, the same age she was now, but she had been so young when Evie had died her memories of her were all but nonexistent. Perhaps that was a blessing though. She had Evie through Lucius and Peggy, all Bruce had was their ghosts and the demons that had chased him since that night in a dirty back alley.

She reached for the mantle again and pulled down a curved pipe. She brought it to her nose and inhaled. “Cherry pipe tobacco,” she said out loud. She touched the image of Thomas Wayne in another of the shiny silver frames. “You look like your dad.” She scrutinized the dark hair and chiseled features of the laughing man in the photo. “He couldn’t have been much older than you are now.”

He was dressed in his long white lab coat, smiling down at a young Martha, the bulge in his pocket probably hiding the very pipe she held in her hands. She placed it back on the stand. “I wonder if Martha fussed at him as much as Peggy fusses at Lucius when he comes home smelling of pipe smoke? I bet she said, ‘Thomas Wayne, a doctor should know better!’” She shook her head, “I bet he’s the reason Lucius still smokes, not often, but every once in a while. He probably wore Bay Rum aftershave too, didn’t he? And he ate peppermints to try to cover the smell but it never did. Do you
still remember that? What he smelled like?” She couldn’t remember what scent her mother wore and Lucius never mentioned it. She looked up at Martha again. Bruce remembered. “And Martha smelled like L’Air Du Temps and baby powder too, I’ll bet, because she worked with kids.”

She looked around at all the personal treasures, laughing out loud as her eyes caught sight of the heavy looking statuette of a kestrel on a carved pedestal. She ran her fingers across the heavily carved feathers and whispered, “The stuff dreams are made of.”

She closed her eyes then opened them slowly, taking in the entire room with fresh eyes. This wasn’t like the rest of the penthouse, this room was personal; more real. This room contained the heart and mind of the real Bruce Wayne.

A thought suddenly occurred to her and she grinned mischievously, “Bruce, Bruce, Bruce,” she clucked her tongue, “shame on you. The least you could have done was make it a little bit of a challenge. Why, this is almost too easy.”

She glanced around the room again and breathed, “Okay Sam, let’s talk about the Black Bird, shall we? Where’s your MacGuffin?”

Her wandering eyes caught on the huge grandfather clock. It was more Art Nouveau than Art Deco but with some of the Egyptian influences that were common during that particular period. The dial looked hand painted with real gold and silver leaf on the sun and moon phases and carved aspects of the gods Ra and Khonsu bracketed the glass casing where swung a heavy brass pendulum with an amulet of Hathor carved into it.

Felicity looked at the image of the horned goddess carefully. She enjoyed reading books on mythology when she was a kid, especially Egyptian Mythology, and Hathor, goddess of fertility, music, romantic love, motherhood, feminine empowerment, along with a host of other great things, had been one of her favorites. Which is why she knew all of her other names including… “Bat.” She smirked, “Now that is what I call a MacGuffin.”

Felicity opened the case and inspected the pendulum, looking at the mechanism carefully. She stuck her head in the opening and looked up to where the chains disappeared into the casing. After a few seconds of poking and prodding she decided to take a chance and tugged at the pendulum holding the aspect of Hathor. There was a sharp click that made her jump back, scared for a second that she had broken the beautiful antique, but she relaxed as the entire clock swung outward along with part of the wall to reveal a cleverly disguised elevator with a biometric scanner in front of the metal doors.

“Okay, well, I see where you decided to put the security now but, seriously, ‘Bat’? You had to use a bad pun to hide your secret cave-thingy? She was the goddess of cows, not bats; that just happened to be her name.” Felicity looked at the biometric scanner carefully then dug in her purse for what she needed. She had come prepared for just about anything and luckily it was a regular handprint scanner and not an optic one. “He did say it was horribly outdated,” she muttered to herself.

Taking out a small spray can, she misted a fine coating of special filaments over the scanner surface then unrolled a magnetic sheet and placed it over the top. She carefully peeled the sheet back and looked at the residue on the surface to see if she had a viable print. Twisting it under the light she grinned and took out a different can to spray the surface so that it built up the filaments and made the print stand out in stark relief.

“See, the problem with scanners like this is that no one ever remembers to wipe them down afterwards and all those oils on the palm of your hand get left behind,” she spoke out loud as though someone were listening. Which they might have been; Bruce bugged everyone else, why not
himself? “After a while, this makes the palm scanner look like a five year olds iPad after a PB&J. Bad for security but lucky for me…” She pressed the print to the glass surface and the doors slid open silently. With a triumphant grin she stepped inside and hit the button.

She stood inside the small elevator and hummed her own private version of muzak until the doors slid open again and she walked inside the large cavernous space of the alternate Batcave.

“Alternate Batcave?” She mused out loud as she looked around the room which appeared to be an abandoned subway tunnel with large tile pillars and carved arches near the ceiling. “Batcave the Sequel maybe? Ooh, the FelicityCave, that’s cool.”

She peered down the long dark tunnel in the distance and noticed the wide tire residue that marked the cement floor. Bruce must occasionally park the tumbler in here. “I think I’ll definitely have to start calling it the FelicityCave because the BabyCave just sounds horribly inappropriate.” She peered up at the ceiling. “No bats in here, right? Bat guano on this dress is a big no no and I don’t much care for having it all over my computers either, just for the record.”

Not seeing any of the furry little flying rodents Bruce was so apparently fond of, she walked up to the bank of monitors that made up the satellite cave’s (the FelicityCave she reminded herself) version of Watchtower and sighed. “Okay, let’s see what this baby can do.”

She brushed the light coating of dust off the large leather chair with a frown, wishing she had brought a Swiffer or at least her coat, and sat in front of the main monitor to play with her new toy. The computers weren’t quite as bad as she thought they’d be but they certainly could be improved upon. After digging for a few minutes she found the security cameras Bruce had hidden in the hallway in front of the penthouse’s door as well as the ones located throughout the interior of the space. She noticed he even had some in the bedrooms as well.

“Okay, that’s going away. I get that you need to be a little paranoid but to an outsider that just comes off as perverted and narcissistic.” She paused and opened a file with cached footage and peeked around. “Nothing. That’s actually a little disappointing really. I was kind of hoping I’d run into your super-secret private porn stash but you must erase those, huh? Oh please, like I don’t know you record that stuff. You probably treat it like a game film so you can improve on your performance. Can you say ‘anal retentive’?” She stopped. “Oh. Oh no. If anyone really is listening to this just forget I said anything. No. Ew. I did not mean that, no sirree! Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but—ah screw it. Moving on.”

She switched on all of the cameras and left the feeds open so she could see when Bruce showed up then got back to playing. She had just enough time to come up with a decent sized shopping list and download a bunch of patches and updates via his monstrously large direct line bandwidth that definitely was not being throttled to a crawl by some busybody governmental asshats with a fear of the ‘interwebs’ and the ‘associated dangers of the free exchange of information’ when, sure enough, at 8:30 on the dot, Bruce stepped out of the elevator doors and approached the keypad outside the penthouse. She zoomed in and smiled as she noticed his irritated expression. “Yeah, you were hoping to beat me here but someone must have told you I came early and now you’re realizing I hacked your keypad too, huh? So much for your big morning power play. Just wait, it gets better.”

Bruce entered the penthouse and noticed her coat hanging from the Egyptian bust first thing. “That’s right, Bruce; follow the bread crumbs.”

She turned up the volume and listened to the sharp report of his shoes against the polished marble floors as he snatched her coat off the sculpture and looked around.

“Felicity?” He called out, her coat clenched in his fist. She snickered evilly as she watched him move
from room to room. She picked up the headphones and adjusted the mike then connected to his cell. He looked down at his phone and the look on his face was...

“Oh, if only Tim were here to appreciate this.” She thought about that and hit record then sent the feed to her phone. “Cheap birthday present,” she muttered.

Bruce picked up the phone, “I see you found the office.”

“Seriously Bruce, ‘Bat’?” She shook her head, “What is it with you masks and bad puns?”

“I’ll be right down,” he bit out before hanging up.

She took off the headphones, ran a quick hand over her hair to smooth it down, then crossed her legs at the knees and artfully arranged her skirt as she swung the chair toward the door. She folded her hands on her lap and waited, a triumphant smile playing around her lips. This was going to be so much fun.

The doors slid open silently and Bruce stepped out in all his well-tailored Armani glory. He fixed her with a glare then in a few long-legged strides he was right in front of her.

She smiled up at him sweetly, “Nice security system.”

“Did you enjoy your little foray into breaking and entering?” He asked with an edge of sarcasm.

“Not really,” she said with all the wide-eyed sincerity she could muster. “Usually, when I commit a felony, I prefer more of a challenge; makes it more fun that way.”

Bruce’s jaw clenched and he looked like he wanted to say something but then he just breathed out a frustrated sigh and looked over the multiple monitors that made up Watchtower. “I take it you’ve had time to come up with a few ideas on how to improve things down here?”

“I have,” she said with a nod.

He looked down at her, “Care to share?”

“Well, first off, I’m thinking…” she pointed to different areas near the workstation, “Coffee pot, mini-fridge, microwave.”

“Do you think you can try to at least make an effort to be serious?” Bruce said in an aggrieved tone.

“If you want me hanging out all night long in the Subway Tunnel of the Damned then there better be caffeine and snacks,” she said seriously. “Also you could hang meat down here; ever hear of space heaters?”

He unceremoniously dumped her coat in her lap and cut his eyes at her, “I was referring to the Watchtower system.”

Felicity laid her coat over her lap and swung her chair around to look at the monitors. “It definitely needs updating and I installed a slew of updates but there are a few things I want to add to it to bring it up to the level of my LAIR setup. Also I need to completely overhaul your security measures because,” she glanced up at him. “Does it need saying?”

“No,” Bruce growled.

“Wrong answer; every Doctor Who fan knows it always needs saying,” she told him with a raised eyebrow. “Altogether it took me, maybe, all of five minutes to break into here and that includes the
guided tour and the ride on the elevator,” she told him in a deadpan.

He cut her another deadly glare, “And I suppose you did a lot of high-security break-ins with Queen?”

“Tons,” she said cheerfully.

“And you’re proud of that?” He asked in a disapproving way.

“Hell, yeah,” she snorted turning in her chair. “I wouldn’t have thought so once upon a time, but until you’ve hacked a computer network after jumping across an open elevator shaft, you haven’t lived,” she said as she typed. “It was almost as much fun as counting cards in a mob boss’s underground casino. Except the heels,” she frowned. “Those heels were a bitch. That and the fact that the guy next to me kept trying to stick poker chips into my cleavage…and the whole being threatened with physical violence thing afterwards. That part sucked.” She glanced up at him and paused at the unbridled fury displayed in his expression. “Sorry; TMI?”

He tightened his lips into a grim line, “There will be no more ‘fun’ as long as you’re working for me.”

“That’s a given,” she snorted.

“No field work, Felicity. I mean it,” he said stubbornly, swinging her around to look at him. He placed both his hands on the armrests as though he were caging her so she couldn’t escape from what he was telling her. “My team works the field; Me, Tim, Dick. You are on tech and coms. Don’t even try to ask for a field assignment because it will not be happening, understood?”

“Fine,” she sighed then swung around to face the monitors again when he released her. “Look, as soon as the renovations are done I’ll move in and make all of the necessary improvements. Until then I’ll look through whatever WayneTech has on hand and decide what I can and can’t use. I’d like to stop by there later today if that’s alright.”

Bruce frowned, “I have meetings most of the afternoon but I can make some time in my schedule for that tomorrow.”

“I think I can go tech gathering by myself,” Felicity told him dryly. At the stubborn set of his jaw, she sighed. “Fine; when do you want to meet tomorrow?”

“I’ll check my schedule and text you,” he said, a self-satisfied smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

Smug bastard, she thought, “I’ll also want to make some improvements to the work area as well.”

“Coffee pots and space heaters?” He said drolly.

“Among other things.”

“Like what ‘other things’?” He asked suspiciously.

For the next hour or so she went through all of her ideas, some he shot down but most he agreed with. By the time they were done she was fairly certain that the new Watchtower would give Barbara and Bruce’s versions a run for their money. Of course, there were a few bits and pieces she didn’t mention but what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her. He might not want her doing field work but she still had her own investigation into Stellmoor she wanted to pursue. Before she called Miranda Tate or Isabel (which she was 99% sure was something she would do at some point within
the next day or two) she wanted to be armed with as much information as possible and if either
Bruce or Oliver found out about what she was planning they’d put the kybosh on it but quick.

After she finished debating tech she moved on to the rest of her plans for the FelictyCave. She
considered just doing it and not telling him but, knowing Bruce, he’d be watching her like a hawk
for a while. She didn’t want to arouse his suspicions too soon or he might start looking more closely
at the stuff that was really worth hiding. “If I’m going to be down here all the time, or at least until I
get another job,” that triggered yet another scowl from him, “I’d like the space to feel more familiar.
It wouldn’t hurt to set up a med bay and an exercise area as well as a lab space.”

“I already have all that at the Batcave,” Bruce said dismissively.

“I don’t,” Felicity retorted. “Look, I’m used to a routine and, whether you like it or not, I was an
integral part of Team Arrow. You might do it all as Batman but I’m used to pursuing my own
answers. I like having a lab space, I like knowing that if anything happens and a member of the team
can’t make it to the Manor I can throw a few stitches or wrap some ribs. I’m also used to a certain
amount of activity between assignments; it keeps me focused and frosty. I’m not asking for a
personal gym but a few mats and some other stuff so I can practice my yoga and maybe a little
strength training can’t hurt, right?”

“You don’t need all that stuff,” he pointed out. “All you’re supposed to be doing is manning
Watchtower, remember?”

She rolled her eyes at him. She had no choice; he had on his stubborn face. She knew Bruce well
enough to be able to manipulate him, at least a little. If she was going to get her way it was time to
execute some well-placed babble, even though it pained her to have to do it on purpose. It was bad
enough when she did it on accident but needs must.

“Look, either this is the FelicityCave or it isn’t.”

“The FelicityCave?” Bruce said with a snort.

“Well I couldn’t very well call it the ‘BabyCave’ because…” At his raised eyebrows and filthy grin
Felicity blushed even though she had let that one slip on purpose. Bruce was a sucker for a dirty pun.
“Never mind. The point is it’s either my space or it isn’t and I’d feel better if I was prepared for any
and all exigencies.” She looked up at him over her glasses and through her long sooty eyelashes then
pushed them back up her nose in a way that made him look at her like she was still an adorable little
five year old.

Sure enough, the corners of Bruce’s mouth quirked upwards and his eyes softened. “Fine, far be it
from me to stop you from preparing for ‘exigencies’,” he drawled.

Yep, I still got it. “Glad you agree,” Felicity said smartly.

Bruce looked at his watch, “The decorator should be here any minute so we should go back
upstairs.”

Felicity got up from the chair causing her coat to fall off her lap. She bent down and picked it up then
noticed Bruce staring intently at her backside. She peered behind her and brushed off the back of her
dress with a frown, “Did I get some dirt on me or something?”

“Nope,” he said with another slow grin and she rolled her eyes at him.

“A person could get whiplash trying to keep up with your moods,” she muttered as she shrugged on
her coat.
“Oh Baby, I think you could manage keep up with my ‘moods’ if you applied yourself,” he said in an easy drawl.

“Cute,” Felicity said wryly as she headed for the elevator. “Just because we’re technically in your ‘bachelor pad’ that doesn’t mean I’m on the playbill for today’s entertainment, understood?”

“Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten our deal.” Bruce waited for her to step into the elevator before he hit the button to send them upstairs then, as the doors shut, he leaned into her ear and spoke in a low voice, “Like I said before, I more than happy to bide my time until you’re ready to invite me into your bed. Again.” He said as though she had to be reminded of what they’d shared only a few short days ago.

“You’ll be waiting a long time before that ever happens,” she said tartly.

Bruce leaned back against the walls of the elevator and grinned, his reflection staring at her from the polished silver surface of the doors. “Don’t worry Baby, I’m nothing if not patient.”

When they stepped out of the clock Bruce turned to her, all business again, “I don’t care what you do with the place, gut it if you like, but this room remains untouched, got it? I don’t want any workmen accidently finding something they shouldn’t.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.” Felicity said, allowing her fingers to caress the small statuette of the Maltese Falcon. “This is actually the only room I happen to like.”

She caught him staring at her with a strange look on his face. She opened her mouth to ask him what was wrong but he cut her off with a nod toward the statuette. “That’s actually one of my favorite pieces,” Bruce said quietly as he folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the desk.

“Bogart fan, huh?” She asked him with a small smile.

“Dashiell Hammett fan actually but I liked the film too,” he nodded. “I don’t get to watch them a lot but I like the old detective movies from the 40’s and 50’s. The idea of a man battling against evil with nothing but his fists and his quick wits always appealed to me. That and the fact that they always got the sassy platinum blonde at the end,” he smirked lustily.

“Gee, you don’t say?” Felicity drawled, earning her yet another brief but genuine smile from the normally grim faced man. “Is it a replica you had made or did you buy it from a prop store?” She asked curiously.

“It’s the original,” he told her.

“Wait, what?” She asked with a laugh. “I thought the original was sold years ago to some private collector for, like, $4,000,000 dollars?”

“Like I said, I liked the movie,” he said with a crooked grin.

Felicity looked at it one more time before shaking her head at Bruce, “So is this your version of showing a girl your etchings? Your go-to play is to take all those starlets and ersatz Page Six society bimbos in here to show them your big bird?”

“No,” he shook his head, seeming strangely bashful for a moment before adopting a more familiar sardonic manner. “Besides, most of the women I’ve dated to keep the press entertained would have taken one look at that and asked, ‘What is it?’” He shrugged, “Film Noir isn’t big with the society bimbo set.”
Felicity gave him a mischievous grin, “Would you have used the line on them at least? You know, after they asked?”

“What line?” He asked.

“You know; they ask ‘What is it?’ and you say it’s—“

“‘The stuff that dreams are made of,’” He finished for her.

Their eyes met for a moment, the air thickening around them. It was as though something clicked between them and Felicity felt her smile falter and drop as the breath in her lungs stilled. Bruce wasn’t smiling either and even though he was a few feet away it felt like he was standing right in front of her, like she could practically feel the heat of him on her skin. It was…electric. As cliché as it sounded, even in her head, there was no other word for it but electric; it was a shock to the system that made her skin buzz and scrambled her thoughts. It wasn’t sexual tension or any other familiar type of energy she usually got from him; this was something more.

The doorbell rang, breaking the strange mood that had passed between them. Felicity dropped her eyes from his and cleared her throat. “I guess that’s the interior design people.”

“I suppose it is,” Bruce said, the moment gone and his voice returning to the ever present tone of subdued annoyance she was used to.

She followed him out to the foyer and felt the first fluttering’s of excitement in her belly. Felicity was a girly-girl, always had been. Yeah, she was tough and she could hack and kick ass but she liked doing girly stuff, too. She considered herself a feminist but part of being a feminist was being proud of who you were and she liked herself the way she was. She didn’t make any excuses for it. She liked dresses that floated around her legs or tight skirts that showed off her frankly awesome butt (thank you John Diggle. The man could be the next Billy Banks or Jane Fonda if he ever decided to leave the vigilante business). She liked makeup and soft sweaters and animal themed footwear. She loved her quaint little bungalow and had enjoyed every minute she’d put into making it feel homey and comfortable. But as DIY as she was, she was really excited about having a real interior designer create the perfect space.

She thought her place had looked pretty good but every decision she’d made in decorating it was something she’d guessed at. For instance, faux painting wasn’t nearly as easy as it looked and, while the end result had been awesome, she vowed never, ever to do that by herself ever again. Four coats and a top coat followed by a God awful mess as she tried to apply the glaze; forget it! She wound up having four inches of split ends cut off because no amount of conditioner could counteract the damage the turpentine did on her hair. It would be nice to have someone who knew what they were doing listen to her and then make it happen. She’d never tell anyone, especially Bruce, but she hadn’t been this excited about something in a very long time.

So imagine her disappointment when she came face to face with Sabine Brandeis, aka Cruella De Vil.

She was every inch the overdone two-dimensional cliché of a serial divorcée with a successful hobby she managed to parlay into career. When she wasn’t busy snagging yet another in a long line of rich husbands, that is.

For nearly forty-five minutes the woman droned on and on about just how fabulous she was and how delicious Bruce was and, of course, how perfect the penthouse already looked since she was the one who designed the space to begin with.
Yes, she was the Morticia apparently. Dead animals and all.

“I decorate all of Bruce’s, I mean Mr. Wayne’s, buildings, don’t I, darling?” She purred, trailing her blood red nails over Bruce’s arm as she swept through the room.

Bruce cleared his throat looking strangely uncomfortable, “Yes, well, Sabine decorated the penthouse for the Gotham Living spread.”

“Yeah, I guessed that,” she said as she eyed the woman’s copious amounts of expensive jewelry and the fox stole she had draped across her shoulders. She’s wearing a dead animal, Felicity kept thinking. With a head. The head is still on her coat. The black marbles stuck inside the carcass’s skull kept staring at her and she had to prevent herself from shuddering in revulsion. She couldn’t even hear what anyone was saying because all she could think about was that scene in Ghostbusters when the fox stole came to life and ran away. The thing kept looking at her with its dead eyes like it was about to leap off Sabine and go straight for her throat. No wonder all the artwork in the room made you feel like you were being watched. Apparently it was her thing. “That’s just creepy,” she muttered under her breath.

“Did you say something, darling?” Sabine asked as she turned toward her and copped a feel of Bruce’s suit at the same time.

At least she’s capable of multi-tasking, Felicity thought. “The, um, statues and stuff. They’re a bit, uh, not me,” she said quietly. “I’d rather we did something simpler. I’m looking for something a little… Disturbing, morbid, downright ghoulish; her mind supplied as the dead animal head looked at her again. “Ornate?”

Sabine looked like she had something bad tasting in her mouth and sneered, “I suppose the elegance and grandeur of 1930’s Art Deco and modernist sensibilities would be a bit beyond someone of your,” she looked her up and down, “limited years. Tell me darling, what is it you had in mind for Bruce’s penthouse?”

“Actually Sabine, Felicity is the lease holder so technically it’s her penthouse,” Bruce said with an easy grin.

“Of course, darling,” Sabine purred, her talons caressing his ruggedly handsome cheek. “It’s so sweet that you would allow your,” she flicked eyes at Felicity again, “niece, was it? To live here.”

“Felicity isn’t my niece,” Bruce said with a slight growl of irritation before he cleared his throat and said in an only slightly less contrite manner, “She’s Lucius Fox’s daughter.”

“Oh yes, I’m familiar; the stepdaughter,” Sabine said with a calculated look. “The one from the second wife.”

Evie had been dead for almost twenty years and yet, every once in a while, Felicity would run into some member of Gotham society who loved nothing more than to put it out there that Evie Smoak was a husband stealing whore with a bastard for a child. Apparently it was their version of entertainment.

“Lucius is my father, not my stepfather,” Felicity corrected her, her own irritation bleeding through.

“Yes, well, I’m sure he cares for you very much too, dear,” the woman said off-handedly.

Okay Cruella, there goes your credit rating.

“Perhaps we should get back to what it was Felicity had in mind?” Bruce said, cutting her off before
Felicity could strangle her with her own dead animal scarf.

“Yes darling, what is it you had in mind again?” The woman asked in a jaded tone. “Something about ‘simple’?”

Resisting the urge to lambast the bitch with a host of colorful swear words she’d learned listening to hardened vigilantes as they sparred with one another (Dig and Oliver had made a game of rapping each other on the knuckles with the White Wax Wood and steel reinforced Bo Staffs and, boy howdy, did that smart) Felicity walked over to the bedroom that held her belongings and waited for them to join her. When they were all in the room Felicity pointed to her old chifforobe. “That. Decorate the house around that.”

The decorator looked at her like she just took a dump on the floor and asked her to put it in a frame and call it the Mona Lisa. “I beg your pardon?”

“Ms. Brandeis, I think I get what she’s trying to say.” The decorator’s assistant, a nice looking man in a bright teal coat and grey Burberry suit turned to her, “You’re thinking of early American antiques or some kind of a rustic feel; lots of chenille and soft fabrics. Maybe a light terra cotta wash on the walls? I’m thinking Southern Elegance meets Tuscan perhaps? Call it Tuscan Eclectic!”

“Exactly,” Felicity said bestowing a sunny smile on the other man. “Rustic but elegant, comfortable, you know; homey. I want lots of warmth and—”

“Homey?” Sabine spat out in distaste. “You want me to dismantle an interior design masterpiece that was featured in a major magazine so I can redesign the space around a piece of garage sale trash? I have a Star Award from the IIDA and you want me to design a space in Flea Market Chic?” She turned to Bruce, “Darling, I realize you want to do this young girl a favor but you have your reputation to think of!”

“Sabine—“ Bruce said, his voice gaining an edge of irritation despite the laid-back expression on his face.

“But darling, really!” She tutted as she cut him off, “You can’t possibly expect me to tarnish my reputation like this. I just won’t do it!” She turned to Felicity, “Dear heart,” she said in a saccharine tone that was designed to set her teeth on edge, “I understand that at your age you have all these marvelous little ideas but this is not your dorm room and a man like Bruce Wayne can’t have his showplace decorated in the latest in Ikea home décor. While I know your dear Uncle Bruce thinks on you like the daughter he never had and doesn’t want to hurt your feelings because you appear to be a very sweet and lovely young girl, perhaps you should just let the, well, more experienced adults handle the details.” Her voice dropped to a more confidential level and she laid a crimson clawed hand on her arm, “Look, girls your age are eager to have a place to show off to their little friends so everyone can see how very grown up they are, but you have enough to worry about with all of your studies, chasing boys, and pledging at the sorority. Let Auntie Sabine take this off your plate, dear; please.”

At that pronouncement even Bruce’s face was showing signs of the Bat coming to bear but Felicity cut him off at the pass.

“You know what, you’re absolutely right,” Felicity said clicking her teeth together in a plastic grin and adopting the bubblegum tones of pure Barbie McSmartass as she went all out Legally Blonde on her ass. “As much as I’d like to show up the other girls at Alpha Nu, Uncle Brucie and I would never ask you to tarnish your reputation like this.” Bruce gave her a look of pure fury as she pointed to Cruella’s assistant. “However, I think his reputation could handle it. What’s your name?” She asked, turning to him.
“Zander. **Zander Franklin,**” he said in surprise.

“Well Zander Zander Franklin, do you have a Star Award from the IIDA?” She asked him in saccharine tones.

“Um, no,” he said, looking from her to the enraged expression on the face of his boss.

“There you go,” Felicity said clapping her hands together and smiling vacuously.

Sabine’s jaw practically hit the floor, “You want him to decorate the penthouse?”

“Yep,” Felicity said, popping her ‘p’ obnoxiously.

“Don’t be ridiculous, he’s just an assistant!” Sabine said snappishly.

Straw meet camel’s back. “And on that note; you’re fired,” Felicity said in an almost gleeful tone. She met Bruce’s eyes and his lips quirked upwards in amusement.

“You can’t fire me,” the woman said, thoroughly scandalized. She turned to Bruce, “Bruce darling, what—?”

“I’m sorry, Sabine, but your services are no longer required,” he said in an almost bored tone. “I’ll call your firm and let them know that Felicity will be going with—“ he turned to the other man again. “What was your name again?”

“Zander,” he said quickly. “Franklin. Zander Franklin. One Zander; just…Zander, not Zander Zander…or not; you can call me whatever you want to, I don’t mind,” he chuckled nervously before clearing his throat and blushing crimson.

Bruce blinked at him for a moment before clearing his own throat and taking his phone out of his jacket, “Zander will be fine. Sorry Sabine but we’ll be going with your associate on this particular job instead.” He looked down at his phone to send a text then flicked his eyes toward the seething designer in the doggie coat. “You can go, I’m sure Zander has it all in hand,” he said with a tight smile.

“Yes sir, Mr. Wayne!” Zander said, eagerly.

“But—but—“ Sabine stomped her designer heels angrily then rushed out the door, “Well, I never!”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Felicity muttered and the slight twitch of Bruce’s lips let her know he’d caught it. She watched as she slammed the door with a bang and frowned, “Well, she’s pissed. If I was a Dalmatian I’d be hiding my spots right about now.”

Zander slapped a hand over his mouth and turned his back quickly, shoulders shaking with barely-contained laughter as Bruce looked up in confusion, “Dalmatian?”

“The coat?” Felicity said, gesturing around her neck. “You know; woof woof?” She mimed a dog barking with her hand.

Zander turned to her, still chuckling and wiping his eyes with a coordinating teal handkerchief, “Thank you; you don’t know how much I’ve always wanted to say that! There have been times when I swear that thing was looking at me.”

“Exactly!” Felicity said, wide-eyed. “It’s creepy, right?”

Bruce’s lips twitched before he cleared his throat, taking on a business-like demeanor. “How soon do
you think you can get us some sketches?” He asked him.

“Is Tuesday soon enough?” Zander said, looking at them eagerly as he pulled out his card. “I need to coordinate with a few people tomorrow but I think I already have a pretty good idea of what you want. Take the weekend, look around, surf the web, and if you see something online or find a picture you like just email me by Monday and we’ll try to incorporate it in the final design proposal.”

Felicity nodded, “Sounds good. Can you meet me here at around the same time?”

“No problem! If it’s okay I can have some men in here this afternoon to take some measurements and we’ll go over everything.” Zander looked around the space again. “Are you just thinking of doing a straight decorating job or will we be doing some construction as well?”

“No construction,” Bruce told him.

“Not so fast,” Felicity told him.

They both looked at her. “Did you want us to throw up a few walls? Knock a few down?” Zander asked.

“No, nothing that complicated, I just want to get rid of that.” She pointed to the bar.

“You want to get rid of the bar?” Bruce asked in surprise. “Why?”

“You have to ask?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I already knew,” Bruce shot back. “Why?”

“Frankly it’s because every time I look at it I feel like I’m trapped in an episode of MadMen,” she said dryly. “I keep expecting Jon Hamm to walk through the door and slap me on the ass before asking me to fix him a martini. It’s…” She struggled for the right word, “smarmy,” she said wrinkling her nose.

“Smarmy?” Bruce repeated, “That’s not even a real word.”

She turned to Zander, “It goes.”

“It stays,” Bruce said firmly. “If you don’t like it, don’t use it, but I still throw cocktail parties here for clients occasionally. It’s why I had it built in the first place.”

“It’s ugly.”

“So don’t look at it,” Bruce told her. “Besides, construction adds time to the job and I want you moved in as soon as possible.”

“Look, is this still your bachelor pad or is it my home? One or the other, which is it?” She challenged. “Because I seem to recall that when I agreed to do this, to move in here and become your partner, you promised me I could do whatever I wanted with the penthouse.”

“You’re not getting rid of the bar,” Bruce said firmly. “It would be a waste of time and money.”

“We’re getting rid of the bar,” she said, ignoring him and turning to Zander.

Zander smiled at them and held up his hands in submission, “Okay, let’s compromise: I’ll come up with a few designs both with and without the bar, maybe try to redesign it a little so it doesn’t overpower the room, and you can decide then.”
“Fine, but I still don’t know why you’re so adamant about keeping that thing,” she said to Bruce. “You don’t even drink.”

“You do,” he pointed out.

“I occasionally have a glass of red wine, that’s all.”

“I know,” he said with a dangerous look in his eyes. “The last glass we shared was fairly memorable.”

She blushed remembering exactly what he was referring to.

“You two are just adorable,” Zander gushed, looking between them. “You remind me so much of me and my husband when we first moved in together.”

“Oh, we’re not—“ Felicity began before Bruce cut her off.

“I’ll let security know your men will be coming by but no one goes into the study, alright. We don’t want that room touched.”

“No problem, Mr. Wayne, Miss Fox,” he said, shaking both their hands in turn. “And thank you again for this opportunity. I promise to do my best to give you the perfect home.”

“Thank you,” she said, not bothering to correct his assumption about her and Bruce being a couple. It would just embarrass the poor man and he seemed so sweet. His experience with having to work with someone like Sabine reminded her a lot of-- A thought suddenly occurred to her, “You’re not going to get in trouble because I fired Sabine, are you?” Felicity asked, suddenly worried for the likable young man.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Bruce answered for him. “I just sent a text to the CEO of Gotham Designs and I imagine that Sabine will be too busy answering her boss’s questions to worry about Mr. Franklin.”

“Thank you,” Zander said sincerely. “Until Tuesday then,” he said exiting the penthouse with a huge smile splitting his face.

After he left, Felicity turned her gaze toward Bruce, “You slept with Sabine, didn’t you?”

“Jealous?” He asked with a mischievous smile.

“Ew, no!” Felicity said in disgust. “I just can’t believe I gave my cookie away to a man who would sleep with Cruella De Vil.”

“Your what?” Bruce said, doing a double-take.

“I can’t believe you slept with that woman!” Felicity snorted. “She was wearing a coat that had a head attached—a head! All I could do is stare at that poor thing. It still had whiskers and teeth!” She shuddered, “Ugh! I mean I can understand leather, people eat cows, but I thought that coat was going to start barking at any second.”

“I never slept with Cruella,” Bruce said wryly then eyed her curiously. “Is that the reason you fired her? Because you thought we slept together?”

“No!” She snorted. “She just pissed me off.” She scowled and looked at the door, “Bitch called my chifforobe garage sale trash. FYI, I bought that at an estate sale, not a garage sale.”
Bruce shook his head with a slight grin and glanced at his watch, “I don’t have to be back at the office for another hour or so. Do you want to sign the lease and then we’ll grab a quick lunch before I take you home?”

“I already have lunch plans but I could use a ride to Wayne Enterprises if that’s where you’re heading.”

Something flashed across Bruce’s eyes but before she could catch it his expression closed up again. “Of course.”

They went through the lease agreement as well as the business contract which officially made her his tenant as well as a ‘consultant’ so everything looked nice and legitimate if anyone tried poking around. Afterwards they went downstairs so Bruce could inform security that the decorators were coming and that they had the run of the place with the exception of the study.

When they got outside Felicity looked up and down the street for the car that Alfred usually drove when shuttling Bruce around but it was nowhere to be seen. The 1925 Rolls Royce Phantom was a fairly conspicuous vehicle even in the more affluent parts of Gotham so she would have detected it were it in the vicinity.

“What are you looking for?” Bruce frowned at her.

“Where’s Alfred?” She asked. “I don’t see the car.”

“Alfred didn’t drive me today. I took the MacLaren instead.” He pulled a key fob from his pocket and the headlights blinked on a futuristic looking red and black sports car.

“Oh,” Felicity said, eyeing the car carefully before walking over to where Bruce was holding the door for her. She eyed the sleek black and red custom leather interior carefully. The car was so low slung to the ground it looked as though you practically had to crawl inside it and the seats were so intimately placed that just looking inside made her feel claustrophobic. “And I thought my Mini was a tight fit.”

“It’s a race car,” Bruce said with a hint of male pride. “It’s basically a motor and the rest is just an afterthought.”

“And you can get in that thing?” Felicity eyed his 6’ foot 2” inch frame and broad shoulders dubiously.

“Get in the car, Felicity,” he said with a hint of exasperation.

She gathered the skirt of her long fitted coat around her and eased inside, wincing a bit as her butt hit the rock hard seat of the sports car a bit harder than she had intended. “Cozy,” she said in a lackluster manner as she was forced to lean back in the seats as they tilted backwards at an odd angle she found to be weirdly disconcerting but that she imagined were designed so that the interior appeared to be more cockpit than car. She eyed the complex dashboard configuration and computerized center console with equal dubiousness. “Do you need a driver’s license or a pilot’s license for this thing?”

“Both.” Bruce slid into the driver’s seat with practiced ease and hit the start button causing the motor to roar to life. Felicity put on the rather complicated seatbelt and watched as Bruce did the same. They were seated so close together that their shoulders were nearly touching. He pulled away from the curb and headed towards midtown.

“So,” she said, squirming a bit in her seat. It felt like she was sitting on a rock and the large bolsters on either side of her made her feel like she was in a leather cocoon. “How much does one of these
things cost? Probably more than a Cooper, huh?”

“Probably,” Bruce said with a smirk. “Let’s just say I doubt you’d be able to lease one of these on a budget.”

“The seats are a bit,” she squirmed again, “hard.”

“What’s the matter?” Bruce asked in a smooth tone, “Don’t you like sitting on something hard?”

She snorted, “Really? You went there?” She shook her head at him. “I’d be offended if that wasn’t such a bad line. Even Tim wouldn’t have pulled that one out of his ass.”

Bruce grinned, his face suddenly younger and more open than she’d seen it in a while, “That was pretty bad, huh? So I take it you don’t like my $1.15 million dollar car.”

“You paid $1.15 million dollars for this thing?” She gaped at him. “And they couldn’t even get you some seats with actual padding?!”

He quirked his lips upwards, “This is designed like an actual race car. The seats are hard and have bolsters to keep the driver and passenger safe in case of a crash.”

“Well, my ass is already killing me,” Felicity muttered.

“I can rub it for you later if you like.” She gave him a filthy look and he grinned again as his inner teenager came out to play, “You know, most women would be thrilled to be taxied around town by a billionaire bachelor in a million dollar sports car.”

“I’m not most women,” she told him.

Bruce looked straight ahead, the smile leaving his face all of the sudden as he grew contemplative. “No, no you aren’t, are you?”

Felicity glanced at him from the corner of her eye but didn’t respond. Other than some occasional grump, Bruce had actually been pretty pleasant. For whatever reason he had decided to stop being an ass, at least for the moment, and she was loath to mess that up by looking at it too closely.

After a few more minutes of companionable silence he pulled up to the curb in front of Wayne Enterprises and helped her out of the car. And she did need help, too. Even yoga didn’t help her with this one. After she got out and brushed the wrinkles from her coat she gave the car one last disgruntled look. “I don’t think I’m a sports car kind of person,” she said dourly.

“I’ll keep that in mind for next time,” Bruce said as he led her into the building.

She looked at him with an arched eyebrow but didn’t say anything. She really couldn’t imagine there’d be a next time. Other than monitoring coms chances are that she and Bruce would only see each other only on the rare occasions that she might stop by her dad’s or Tam’s offices.

“I’ll walk you up to Lucius’s office,” Bruce said turning towards her. “It’s been a while since we’ve had lunch together. You don’t mind if I tag along, do you?”

“Tag along?” She asked in confusion.

“Lunch,” Bruce said. He arched an inquisitive eyebrow at her, “You said you and your dad had lunch plans, remember?”

“Oh.” Felicity flushed, although for the life of her she didn’t know why. “No, you misunderstood. I
wasn’t having lunch with—“

“Felicity!”

She looked up to see Jake heading toward her and she turned toward him with a smile, “Hi Jake.”

He smiled down at her, “You’re here early but, luckily for you, I just so happen to be free. Are you ready for lunch?”

She nodded, “Yup, and I should warn you; I’m a big eater so this won’t be cheap.”

He chuckled, “I think I can handle it.” He looked up at Bruce, noticing him staring at them intently.

“Oh hi Mr. Wayne, sorry if I was interrupting, it’s just that Felicity—“

“It’s no problem; Felicity and I were done anyway,” Bruce told him abruptly, his expression stiff as he eyeballed the younger man. “Enjoy your lunch.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jake said with a polite nod of his head before he offered his arm to Felicity.

“Ready to take care of that big appetite of yours?”

“Are you kidding? If it’s food, I’m there!” She said with a small laugh. She started to say goodbye to Bruce but he had already turned his back on them and was heading to the elevators.

She had the overwhelming urge to call out to him to apologize, but that was ridiculous, right?

Taking one last look at his stiff carriage as he entered the elevator, she bit her lip then turned to Jake again, forcing a smile. “Let’s go eat.”
Chapter Twenty-Three

Lunch with Jake was pleasant and fun, two words she hadn’t been able to use in conjunction to anything in her life for a while. Felicity looked around the kitschy 1950’s style diner with the chrome and red tables and fiddled with the mini jukebox at their table with a grin. “This is really cool,” she told him.

“Told you I would show you a good time,” he said, dropping a few coins in their jukebox and smiling at her reaction when Elvis’s ‘Blue Suede Shows’ was piped in over the speakers.

“Hah!” She laughed, “Oh man, my friends back in Starling would have loved this place. We used to hang out at this little burger joint Diggle’s family owned called ‘Big Belly Burger’ all the time. Best burgers ever.”

“You’re a burger girl?” Jake asked, eyes twinkling. “I’d have thought you’d be more into champagne and caviar than burgers and shakes.”

“Have you met me?” She snorted. “Just because my dad’s a CEO doesn’t mean we grew up all hoity toity.”

“I didn’t think so but I thought I’d better check just to be sure,” he told her teasingly. He picked up his menu and looked it over, “So, your friend Sergeant Major Diggle made the best burgers ever, huh?”

“Well, not him; his family. Why?” Felicity asked, picking up her menu as well.

“It’s just that I’m pretty sure your opinion about the superiority of your friend’s burgers is fixing to take a bit of a nosedive after today,” he said with quiet assurance.

“Oh, really?” She asked, “You’re pretty sure of that?”
“Oh yeah,” he said with a definite nod.

“Burgers are pretty good here then, huh?”

“Yep,” he said with a quirk of his mouth as he winked at her over his menu.

“We’ll see,” she said quietly.

“See, being a Southern boy I know the secret to a good burger and it’s something you won’t find out there on the West Coast where your friend Diggle is from,” he said with a hint of arrogance.

“And, pray tell, what would that be, hmm?” Felicity asked primly, pushing her glasses off her nose.

His face broke out in a handsome smile before he cleared his throat and affixed a very serious look on his face, his voice dropping to a somber tone. “You see, them hippy dippy burger joints over yonder in Starling City think that you can just slap a slice of avocado or stick some smelly French cheese on some meat and call that a burger. Now that ain’t a burger, that’s some perversion of good beef. Now the real secret to a good burger is all about the grease.”

She resisted the urge to snort with laughter as his ever-present drawl broadened and he puffed his chest out in exaggeration. “Really? The grease?”

“Yes ma’am, gotta have good grease to make a good burger,” he told her. “Back home in Carrolton, Mississippi we had this little joint called Dixie’s that wasn’t much bigger than three of these booths put together and that was including the grill. It was just some hole in the wall that had been there since Sherman rode through Atlanta but it had the best grease you ever ate in your life. The walls of the place were coated in it. You couldn’t even tell what color the wallpaper used to be there was so much of it.”

“That’s disgusting!” Felicity burst out in laughter.

“No ma’am, that was just part of the charm of the place! It added to the ambience.”

She began to laugh so hard she had to wipe her eyes with her napkin, “Ambience, huh?”

“Her grease was so good that she kept it on the corner of the grill in an old coffee can and folks would ask her to dip the buns in it before she slapped the meat on top.”

“You’re lying!” Felicity told him.

“If I’m lying, I’m dying!” He said leaning back in his chair and throwing up his hands in supplication.

“I suppose no one back in Carrolton, Mississippi ever heard about cholesterol?” She asked, feeling lighter than she had in days.

“Yes ma’am, we have,” he said solemnly. “But we’re pretty sure it’s just a dirty rumor y’all Yankees came up with so you could take all the fat out of our food and keep it all for yourselves.”

Felicity looked at him teasingly, “So there is a vast fat hording conspiracy at play?”

“Well, that’s the rumor anyway,” he said, flashing her that brilliant grin again.

“So, since you’re the expert, which burger should I order?” She asked him, tapping on her menu.

“Well, if it were me ordering it, I’d suggest the Cowpoke Special. Now that there is a burger; pepper
jack, Monterey jack, and cheddar with bacon, bacon, and more bacon and topped off with—“

“Bacon?” She asked.

“Well, I was going to say Memphis style barbecue sauce but you can get them to add more bacon if you ask.”

“You can never have too much bacon, right?” She said with an assertive nod.

“You are a woman after my own heart, Felicity Fox,” he said flirtatiously.

“Sounds good,” she said closing her menu.

“Really?” He asked in surprise.

“Why? Don’t think I can handle the grease?”

“No, it’s just that it’s not exactly kosher. I figured you’d have some kind of dietary restrictions or something.”

“We don’t really keep kosher and the only dietary restriction I have is ‘nuts’.” She shrugged, “Allergic.”

“Good to know,” he nodded. “Guess that means on our next date I shouldn’t take you to this other place I like to go where they toss peanut shells on the floor.” He shook his head ruefully, “That’s a shame because the beers might be warm but they burn the steaks just right.”

“Planning a next date, are you?” She asked, feeling a little flirtatious herself.

“Well, this one seems to be going pretty good so far;” he said in a low rumble that made her face flush. He grinned at her, “Good Lord, but you are the sweetest thing I think I have ever seen. My mama would call you a ‘unicorn’.”

“Unicorn, huh? What’s that?” She asked, her cheeks still ablaze with color.

“A mythological beast,” he said and laughed at her expression. “My mama used to say that finding a good old-fashioned girl these days would be like finding a unicorn in the downtown supermarket: Highly unlikely.” He shook his head at her, “Yet here you are, Miss Felicity Fox, and smack dab in the middle of Gotham of all places.” His face took on a slightly forlorn expression, “Figures I’d meet a girl like you a couple of weeks before I’m fixing to head off to Central City.”

“Yeah, my dad mentioned that,” she said, with a more subdued curve of her lips. “Still, getting a job as a Security Consultant in Central City? You must be looking forward to that, right?”

“I was,” he said quietly, reaching for her hand across the table and running his thumb across her knuckles.

She bit her lip and blushed again before relaxing into the caress. This was okay, she told herself. She was allowed to enjoy herself, right? This is what she wanted; normal things like holding hands and eating burgers with a really great guy.

A sudden spurt of guilt from deep inside of her bubbled forth as she remembered Tim’s admonishment about using Jake to get back at Bruce. “Jake?”

“Yeah, darlin’?” He asked with a crooked grin.
She smiled and blushed slightly at the endearment but kept going, “Um, I should tell you that I’m not really in any position to be in a romantic relationship myself right now.”

“Why not?” He asked her quietly, but his expression was still soft and open.

“Lots of reasons,” she said, avoiding his eyes, “but mostly it boils down to the fact that I’m not really very good at dating.”

He chuckled, “What does that mean, ‘not very good at dating’?”

“Well,” she bit her lip and tilted her head slightly in embarrassment, “I have a tendency to get dumped one date in. My last real date consisted of one dance that was interrupted by a work emergency and ended with the words, ‘let’s just be friends’ and ‘I’ll call you’. Hint; if someone says that to you, it means that they won’t be calling.” He began to laugh and she offered him a disgruntled sigh, “If you think that’s funny, my only other two brushes with romance lasted barely a day and both of those ended with an almost identical set of dump speeches along the lines of ‘it’s not you, it’s me’.” She shrugged, “Really, it’s probably for the best that you’re leaving town that way we can just keep this to friendship.”

“I would love to be your friend, Miss Baby,” Jake said with a flirtatious grin as he leaned forward to squeeze her hand encouragingly. “And for the record, little darlin’; any man who’d run out on a pretty little thing like you is a damned fool. That said, my Mama didn’t raise no stupid children and I think you’re doin’ just fine. This here happens to be the best date I’ve been on all day.” She laughed and he smiled at her again. “By the way, since we’re such good friends now, I meant to ask if you ever wear blue jeans?”

“What?” She asked with a startled laugh.

Jake’s hand left hers and he sat back and tilted his head as he examined her pretty floral patterned dress and pink cashmere cardigan. “Every time I’ve seen you you’re wearing a dress. Do you even own a pair of jeans?”

“Oh course I do!” She chuckled in mild embarrassment. Dropping her eyes to the countertop she began to fiddle with her paper napkin. “I just don’t wear jeans much because I’m kind of short and dresses make my legs look longer.”

“I wasn’t complaining,” he drawled. “I meant to tell you that you look real pretty today, in fact.” His eyes scanned her from the top of her head to where her torso disappeared under the table top. “Like a little bit of springtime in the middle of winter.”

“Come on!” She laughed at him, “Is flirting a required class in high school where you’re from or what?”

“As a matter of fact, it is,” he said with a nod. “Along with Advanced Auto Mechanics and Football 101.”

“Car guy, huh?”

“I can find my way around an engine,” he admitted.

“You guys ready to order?” Their waitress asked, flashing them a friendly smile, her pen and pad at the ready.

They both ordered the Cowpoke Special, double fries, and sodas. Felicity waited until their poodle-skirted server left before picking up the conversation again. “I rode in a MacLaren today.”
“Bruce Wayne’s P1 Supercar?” He asked, his jaw dropping slightly.

“Supercar?” She repeated wrinkling her nose slightly. “Is that its real name or are you just that big of a fan?”

He chuckled, “Naw, that’s really what it’s called. Did you enjoy yourself?” He asked curiously.

“Not really,” she shrugged. “I guess I just don’t see what the big deal is,” she said wrinkling her nose.

His eyes widened in surprise, “You rode in a vehicle that costs over a million dollars and is one of the fastest street legal race cars ever made, topping out at 217 miles per hour, and you don’t see the big deal?”

“Eh, the seats were uncomfortable,” she said with a disgruntled look.

“The seats were uncomfortable?” He sputtered.

“Look if you’re going to pay a million dollars for a car then it shouldn’t have seats that make your butt go numb,” she said simply. “I mean, that’s just stupid. My Cooper was bigger on the inside than that thing and it had way better seats. Plus, who needs a car that goes that fast when you’re going to be stuck in Midtown traffic anyway? He should have saved his money and bought something more comfortable.”

“I sincerely hope you did not say that to Bruce Wayne,” he gaped at her.

“I did actually,” she admitted.

He shook his head in disbelief, “And what did he say?”

She pursed her lips, “He said something about how most girls would be impressed by a million dollar sports car and then got really quiet all of the sudden and didn’t speak to me for the rest of the ride.”

“No wonder! You don’t dis a man’s vehicle, woman! You probably hurt the poor man’s feelings!” He said, with a huge belly-laugh.

Their food came and they spent the next hour or so laughing and talking about any and everything. She conceded that the burger was probably one of the best she’d ever eaten but told him Big Belly still had it beat even though that was due less to the actual burger and more to the memories associated with the place. Afterwards he took her back to her dad’s building, insisting on driving her when she offered to just catch a cab from the restaurant.

As they pulled up he turned to her, “So, what did you really think? Good date or do I have to hang my head in shame?”

“I had a really good time,” she said easily. “Thank you for asking me, I really appreciate it. And thank you for staying for the entire date; that was a bonus.”

“Trust me when I say that the pleasure was all mine,” he said with the flirty wink she was quickly getting used to. “Would you like to go out with me again sometime then?”

“Really?” She asked in surprise.

“Well, I know we’re just keeping this to friendship given the fact that I’m heading across the country soon and you’re not really looking for anything serious but I figure we could make the most of what
"Time we do have and break that streak of yours; what do you say?"

"Yeah, that would be nice," she said with another blush.

He chuckled, his eyes ghosting over her cheeks. "I happen to be free tomorrow night if you want to catch a movie."

Her face fell, "I would but I have dinner plans with friends."

"I'm workin' pretty much every night for the next few weeks but I'm off the Friday before the Foundation shindig so if you don't already have plans...?" He asked.

"No, Friday's okay," she said nodding, a smile playing around her lips. "Do you want to meet here in front of the building?"

"My mama would have my hide if I let a girl wait out front in the freezing cold," he said clucking his tongue. "I figured I'd do it proper and pick you up at your door."

She winced, "Are you sure you want to do that?"

"Why not?" He chuckled.

"It's just if you come up to the penthouse you might be expected to stay for dinner or something."

"I'm sure I can remember to use my napkin and keep my elbows of the table if you're worried about me embarrassing myself," he said teasingly.

"Yeah, but you'd have to meet my family," she said cringing a little.

"I like your daddy," he said with raised eyebrows. "Seems he likes me too from what I can tell."

"Not Dad," she said reluctantly.

"Your brother? Sister?"

"Well," she said, blushing again but for a completely different reason. "I know this is going to sound weird but if you came to the house I'd have to introduce you to my, well, kind of my Chinese grandmother."

He opened his mouth to say something then shut it again as he looked at her funny, "Your Chinese grandma? I sense that there may be a story there.

"She's not really my grandmother, of course," Felicity said quickly. "Well, she could be because Lucius is my dad and he's black so I suppose she could also be my—"

He took her hand gently and smiled at her, "Breathe."

She took a centering breath before speaking again, "It's a long story but, basically she raised my mom after my grandparents died and then stayed after my mom passed away to help Lucius. He wanted her to just live with us as a member of the family, which she is, but she didn't want to accept any money that she hadn't earned herself and he didn't want her to have to get a job outside of taking care of me and my mother so she compromised and accepted his offer to make her our housekeeper. It was just an empty title really, but he let her have her way because he insisted she take his money and she didn't want to look like she was accepting Lucius's charity even though he thought of her as his mother-in-law. She's nearly eighty...we think; she keeps changing her age on us," she frowned then shook her head. "Anyway, dad hired a maid service so she's actually retired...from her job that
isn’t really a job. She just doesn’t know it yet.”

“She doesn’t know she’s retired?” Jake said slowly.

“Dad tried to tell her but she got mad so we decided it would be better if she just didn’t find out.”

He laughed out loud at that. “Well, I don’t a have a problem with meeting her. She sounds like a hoot!”

“Um,” Felicity bit her lip and squinted up towards the roof of the car as she thought about how she should phrase what she was going to say. “Have you...ever heard the term ‘Yenta’?”

“Yenta?” He repeated. “I may have but I’m not quite sure what it means.”

“Peggy Ann is a Yenta,” she told him. “Basically it means that she drives everyone in my family insane and tries to marry us off at every opportunity.”

“Sounds like my mama,” he said ruefully.

“Yeah, well, if I had told her I was going out with you she would have insisted on coming along.” Felicity shook her head, “I’m not even kidding.”

“Yep, that’s my mama all right,” he nodded. “I got to remember to call her and let her know I have another word besides ‘busy body’ to describe her with. Yenta,” he said, testing the word. “Kind of just rolls off the tongue, doesn’t it?” He nodded and flashed a quick grin before settling into a more subdued smile, “Look, if you don’t want me there, that’s okay, but I honestly wouldn’t mind meeting your family. Especially if I get to spend more time with you.”

Felicity shook her head in disbelief, “You’d really have dinner with my family on our second date?”

“That’s not so unusual where I’m from,” he said. “Your daddy will tell you that back home there’s just not a whole lot of places for folks to go, so our idea of fun is just visiting folks. Be a nice change of pace actually. Been a while since I’ve had a good home cooked meal.”

“Okay,” she said in amazement. “Wow. You’re sure? Peggy Ann can get pretty, um...” She bit her lip again, “Let’s just say she’s ‘unique’.”

He chuckled warmly, “I’m sure she is and I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Next Friday? Around seven?” She asked.

“Sounds good, I'll see if I can switch a few things around and give you a call so you know for sure,” he said then got out of the car to open her door for her. He walked her up to where the doorman was standing and squeezed her hand again. “Until next time, Miss Baby Blue-eyes.”

“Bye,” she waved at him and went into the building. She looked back and noticed that he stayed outside until she was at the elevator before turning around and driving off.

Felicity got into the elevator and looked at her reflection in the mirrored doors as they closed. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, and she was smiling; the first real smile she could remember seeing on her face in a long time.

“So this is what normal feels like,” she mused out loud.

She looked at her reflection again.
“Yeah, I could get used to this.”

Bruce stood in the middle of the Wayne Foundation Gallery peering up at a portrait of a toddler, no more than a year or two, standing in the middle of a lush green field surrounded by wildflowers. The artist had captured a perfect moment in time. Baby-fine wisps of white-blonde curls blew across full round cheeks as the child’s mouth was opened wide in a grin that showed off all her newly erupted baby teeth. Her cornflower blue eyes radiated pure joy and trust as she clutched a broken and bent handful of wildflowers and held them up to whoever had captured her attention.

It wasn’t a particularly unique subject. Portraiture of children gathering flowers in a pastoral setting were common, you could even call the subject matter of the entire composition derivative. Most of the paintings he’d seen of the genre had an almost paint by numbers feel or felt horribly dated like the ubiquitous Carolyn Blish or Myrle Medeiros prints of the sixties and seventies. This one though, this painting was special.

There was life to it. The child’s eyes danced with sun-touched joy, the white dress she wore showed the rumple of play and the discoloration of fresh grass stains. There was perfection in the imperfection of the crushed and broken petals and ragged stems that trailed dirt and roots over pudgy fingers. You could practically smell the green scents of spring in the air, the baby powder on her skin, and her hair was painted so realistically you could almost reach out and touch it allowing the fine silken curls to wind around your fingertips. It was like someone had captured a beautiful dream and framed it so the rest of the world could feel what the artist was feeling at that exact moment: love, serenity, happiness.

Bruce’s fingers reached out to trace the brass plaque mounted below the painting containing the name of the piece as well as the artist.

My Happiness
Evie Smoak-Fox

“I love that painting. It always brings back memories.”

Bruce turned his head and smiled, “What brings you to the Wayne Foundation, Lucius?”

“I like to eat my lunch with Evie sometimes,” he said with a gentle smile as he stared up at the painting. He pointed to it with the same hand that held a brown paper bag. “I remember that like it was yesterday. Baby was just shy of sixteen months old and she had started walking on her own maybe a couple of days before that. The adoption had been finalized only a week before. Evie wanted to do a portrait to commemorate the occasion so we went upstate to the lake house for a mini-break slash honeymoon.” He grinned at Bruce, “We’d only been married for a couple of months and hadn’t had a chance to get away yet but Evie insisted Baby stay with us. Most men might have balked at the idea of taking a young child along on their honeymoon but I didn’t mind.” He looked back up at the portrait and his eyes filled with a soft light. “That was my special baby.” He looked down for a moment and smiled ruefully, “Don’t get me wrong, I love all my children equally, but Felicity and I had a special connection from the moment I first saw her in Evie’s arms. She just had this way of looking at you that made everything fall away until all that was left was this feeling…” he stopped as though he couldn’t form the right words to express the emotion so Bruce did it for him.

“That everything would be okay,” Bruce said quietly. “Like as long as she was smiling you were invincible.”

“Exactly,” he smiled softly. “Even as a baby she never cried; never had a single temper tantrum. All
she ever did was smile at you and the love just poured out of her.” Lucius pointed to the painting again. “I was standing beside her while Evie sketched. I was worried that she might run into an ant hill or hurt herself on some stickers but she was fearless. She must have fallen a dozen times, scared the hell out of me doing it and made a mess of that dress of hers, but she just kept laughing. Like falling down was the most hilarious thing in the world. Every time I’d hear her giggle it reminded me of soap bubbles popping in the wind, the sound just carried and you could feel it in your chest.” He sighed, his smile faltering as his eyes took on a look of melancholy, “That was the beginning of our one perfect year. By the next year the ALL was back and Evie became so fragile…and then she was gone.” He sighed and moved to sit on the bench near the painting as he opened his bagged lunch. “I still had Felicity though; my special baby. If it weren’t for her I don’t know how I would have gotten through it.” He held up half of a sandwich. “Have you had lunch?”

“I’m good,” Bruce said sitting next to him, still looking at the painting.

“What brings you down here to the gallery?” Lucius asked, taking a bite of his sandwich.

“They’re clearing out the penthouse and moving all the artwork downstairs,” He threw Lucius a rueful look. “I don’t know if she told you but I offered Felicity the penthouse to use while she was staying down here. She wasn’t a fan of the Art Deco stuff so I thought I’d look around and see if there might be something she would like instead.” He looked first at the painting and then at Lucius. “I thought about this one but I didn’t want to do anything without asking you first.”

“It’s your painting, Bruce,” Lucius said. “You’re the one who bought it at the Leukemia Research Foundation Charity auction, not me.”

“I might have bought it but it’s your painting,” he told him. “You just did me the honor of allowing me to bid on it.”

“I thought about keeping it,” Lucius said with another soft smile. “I’d probably horde all of Evie’s paintings if I could. After she died I started tracking them down, one by one, until I realized that’s not what she would have wanted. She wanted to share what she made with other people so, when the LRF approached me for some of her paintings, I knew that this was the one she would have given them. There’s just so much hope in that painting, so much promise of life and a future free of that damn disease.” He sniffed and cleared his throat, “Besides, I still have some of her sketches and my memories. And Baby, of course.” He turned to look at him again, “Speaking of which, I should say thank you; it was nice of you to offer the penthouse to her like that.”

Bruce shifted a little uncomfortably, “I probably should have run it past you first.”

“Probably,” Lucius said in a neutral tone. “I talked to her last night right before she went to bed and she may have mentioned doing some consulting work for you. That wouldn’t happen to be for one of your special projects, would it?”

“I’ll keep her safe, I promise,” Bruce said quietly.

“I know,” Lucius told him. “I’m not worried about that, Bruce. When it comes to Baby you’ve always taken a special interest, made sure she was safe. I can’t help but wonder though if there’s something else you need to tell me?”

He didn’t say anything, allowing the silence to fill the space between them.

Lucius reached into his briefcase and pulled out a thermos. He poured a measure of tea from it into the plastic cup that formed the lid and sipped carefully before speaking again, “I was more than twice Evie’s age when we met. She had just turned twenty with a child who was less than six months old.
She was still working part time as a cocktail waitress at a casino, her art just beginning to take off and, here I was, already in my forties and married longer than she’d been alive with two young children of my own. I had already run several companies, brought several more back from the brink of ruin, and my career was thriving. I was at the top of my game professionally speaking. My personal life was another matter.” He took another sip of tea. “I’d basically abandoned Tanya a long time ago and hardly knew what our kids even looked like. We kept putting off kids, and putting off kids, always thinking we’d have them when we slowed down but, little did we know, life never slows down.”

“We were getting older and that window was closing in on us so I broke down, even though I wasn’t really in a place for it, and agreed it was time to have the family I promised my wife I’d give her when we first met. Tanya was in her forties as well, healthy but still reaching a point when it was now or never, so first we had Tam and then Luke, one right after the other. It wasn’t the five that we’d talked about back when we were twenty and had a lifetime to get around to that sort of thing, but two was more than most could hope for without medical intervention at our age. When they were born she cut back dramatically on her workload and thought for sure I’d do like I always said I would and make time as well, but I didn’t. I couldn’t. Having a family just made me want to work even harder because that’s what a man does; he provides for his kids. I spent every waking minute at work thinking that the personal stuff would wait. I missed holidays, birthdays, anniversaries; I thought there’d be more to come so I’d write a check or have my assistant send Tanya some jewelry and figured she’d be happy with that. She wasn’t,” he said with a snort.

“One day I came back from a business trip to find that she and the kids had moved out a couple of weeks before and I just hadn’t noticed.” He looked at him, “I didn’t even notice, Bruce. I was so used to crawling into my bed long after she had gone to sleep and waking up before the crack of dawn that I never even noticed the bed was empty; that takes a special kind of selfish, let me tell you. One morning I happened to sleep in for once and finally noticed she was gone, the kids were gone, and sitting there on the breakfast table was a separation agreement, all I needed to do was sign on the dotted line.”

“I tried to change her mind but she’d heard it all before.” He looked at Bruce again, “I made some effort, of course. I was raised that a man had certain responsibilities to his family and I tried to slow down a little, saw my kids on the odd weekend, but it was too little too late for Tanya and I couldn’t blame her. Still, I tried. Or, at least, I thought I did. See, keeping my family on track was a matter of pride at that point. I vowed that I wouldn’t fail; that if I could succeed everywhere else that I could make my marriage work, too. It didn’t matter that Tanya wasn’t happy; she’d just have to deal with it like I did. No one ever guaranteed happiness, or so I’d always been told.”

“I married that woman when we were both still in college, when life was a clear path that stretched in front of us with no obstacles in sight. We’d both worked hard, both sacrificed our time and effort on building something together, but, somewhere along the way, we started growing apart. I grew apart from her, rather,” he said quietly. “The blame for the breakdown in our marriage lay solely at my feet. Tanya was still the same good and loving person she’d always been but success had gone to my head and I was caught in this selfish rich man’s world view; it wasn’t our lives, it was my life.

“At first I thought all they needed was a little more attention so I’d show up but I wasn’t there. Physical presence and being present are two different things. I’d make promises, break all of them. I never caught on to what Tanya was trying to tell me. I bulldozed over her, dismissed her concerns, her needs. I told her she needed to come home and stop her childishness. All this separation and marriage counselling stuff was just absurd. I didn’t need some stranger telling me how I felt about my wife! I’d been married to the woman for more than half my life at that point; I knew exactly what was wrong. The only problems we had were those damned charity board wives and shrinks down at the Foundation filling her head with nonsense.”
“I couldn’t for the life of me understand what was so wrong with the marriage we’d shared for so long. It was working fine for me so what was her problem all of the sudden? Didn’t she have everything she needed? Didn’t I keep her in pretty clothes and jewelry, and provide her with all the money she could want? Didn’t I let her have a career? It didn’t matter that she’d earned her doctorate or that her work changed lives, I was the ‘Businessman’s Businessman’ and my face was on the cover of Forbes and Newsweek so that made me the provider. I was Mr. Lucius Fox; the breadwinner, the man of the house, I was the one in charge and she needed to get over her little snit and come home because, really, what else could she possibly want, right? That’s what a man was supposed to do, wasn’t it? Provide for the family? She should be happy, not acting as though I’d done something wrong. But no, she wouldn’t budge; so I went home alone, night after night, until I started feeling as hollow and empty as that damn house.”

“One day I was meeting with a client in Vegas whose wife owned an art gallery and I saw this portrait of his in the office. It wasn’t the usual grim oil painting you usually see CEOs pose for; there was a light and life to it. I’d been thinking about having my portrait done for a while so I asked my client to get his wife to introduce me to the artist. She invited me to a gallery showing to meet her in person and I didn’t have anything better to do so I went.”

“I walked into this gallery, my mind more on the next day’s schedule than the paintings on the wall, when I look up and see the most hauntingly beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life. No, it was more than that; her beauty wasn’t just on the outside. No, it was like she glowed from the inside out. She smiled at me and everything just fell away; work, the stress, the loneliness, everything. One smile from her, a complete stranger, and it was the most profound thing I had ever experienced with the exception of holding my children for the first time. The minute I laid eyes on her I knew that I would do anything it took to have her smile at me like that for the rest of my life.”

“I pursued her like a man possessed. I tried to get her to come to Gotham to do my portrait but she refused. It was her first showing and she was still dependent on her waitressing to make ends meet so I offered her a ridiculously large commission right then and there to quit her job and come home with me. I know it sounds insane now, but all I knew was that I needed her to be with me and I was willing to do anything it took to make that happen. It was as though I was under some kind of spell, all logic flew out the window and I felt this overwhelming need to make this woman mine. No matter how much I offered her though, she still wouldn’t budge so I did. I asked her how long the portrait would take and I extended my trip so I could work around her schedule.” He smiled, guilt clouding his eyes, “After she died I had to apologize to Tanya for that. I think that’s one of the things that was hardest for her to accept in the beginning; that I couldn’t make time for my own family but I could change my whole life around for another woman. Of course, at the time, I didn’t see it that way; I could only see her. Within a day I was in her studio and the first thing I saw was that smile. She was dressed in some kind of paint splattered pair of overalls, not a stitch of makeup on her face, and holding the prettiest baby next to my own that I’d ever seen, and I was gone. Within a week I was watching Evie smile as she slept beside me in her bed and that separation agreement I’d been fighting tooth and nail was signed, sealed, and delivered by the next day. Within two weeks I had moved out of the home I shared with Tanya and she, Felicity, and Peggy had set up housekeeping in my new place here in the city. I had already asked her to marry me and told my attorney to give Tanya whatever it took to get it done as quickly and amicably as possible. Seven months later I was divorced, a day after that I was married again, and less than two months later I was officially Baby’s daddy even though I’d been ‘dada’ since the first time I’d held her in my arms.”

He smiled at Bruce then gazed back up at the child’s portrait, “Evie handed her to me so she could gather some supplies and she just looked up at me, calm as you please, and said it. It was her first word and I was the first person to hear it. I couldn’t say that about my own children, but I could with her. I looked up at Evie and she just smiled at me, tears in her eyes, and I knew they were my home. From that moment on I vowed that I was going to always be the first person she’d see in the morning.
and the last person she’d see at night, and I was. I watched over them both. I became the husband I
should have been to Tanya and the father I should have been to my own children. I taught her how
to walk, I dried her tears when she was sad, I was the first person she’d ask for if she was sick; I was
her daddy. Two years later Evie was gone and I wasn’t just a parent but the only parent that little girl
had, but I was her father since the day I first set eyes on her. It was love at first sight just like it was
with Evie.”

Lucius looked up at him, his face solemn. “Evie, in the short time we had together, taught me that
time is fleeting. She showed me what it meant to be present. It was because of her that I was able to
going back to Tanya and, not just apologize like I did a million times before, but truly understand what it
was I was apologizing for. She also taught me that a man can have all the money in the world but it
won’t buy him even one more minute of true happiness.” He sighed, “I have made a lot of mistakes
in my life that I regret every single day but, even though the timing might not have been to
everyone’s liking, the one thing I will never regret is loving that woman. Loving her taught me what
it meant to be a husband, a father, a friend, and a man; not just a provider. We might have only had a
handful of months together but I wouldn’t have missed a minute of it. Even though I lost her in the
end, I’m glad I grabbed on and held tight to what little we did have while I could. Without Evie I
wouldn’t have had Felicity; without Felicity I wouldn’t have Tam or Luke. Evie taught me how to be
a better husband and Felicity taught me how to be a better father, not just for her, but for all of my
children. I would have lost everything, Bruce, and I never would have known just what I had missed
out on until it was too late.”

He screwed the cap back on his thermos and placed it back in his briefcase. He looked back at the
portrait on the wall and smiled one last time as though saying a silent goodbye to a beloved ghost
before getting up and putting his free hand in his pocket. “Well, back to the salt mines, I guess.” He
tilted his chin toward the painting on the wall. “I don’t have a problem with Baby having the
painting, Bruce. You should give it to her.”

“I will,” Bruce said quietly, his face engulfed in shadow.

He took his hand out of his pocket and placed it on Bruce’s shoulder, giving it a companionable
squeeze. “You remind me of myself in a lot of ways, Bruce.”

“Thank you,” Bruce said, meeting the other man’s eyes. “That means a lot coming from you,
Lucius.”

“Don’t thank me, son,” Lucius looked down at him, his expression as enigmatic as the words he
spoke. “That wasn’t necessarily meant to be a compliment.”

Bruce looked up at him in wary confusion but Lucius just smiled and walked away.

Later that evening Felicity made four phone calls.

The first was to Diggle where she discussed everything under the sun with him except the one thing
she wanted to.

Oliver.

She didn’t ask and he didn’t volunteer and it was just as well because she was so confused her brain
would have turned to mush had she tried. He brought up Oliver’s name twice; the first was when he
mentioned the big post-brawl wrap up in which he told them both off for being a couple of ‘dumb-
asses’. She appreciated that tidbit immensely and told him so. He shared a few other revelations as
well, such as the fact that the book, aka Oliver’s list, was connected to the League and which meant that there was a good possibility that Isabel was a member since her name was in it. That was pretty handy information to have so she filed it away to trot out later. She then assured him she was fine, gave him a brief rundown on Tim and Barbara, and promised to speak to him again soon.

He ended the conversation with, “Call him.”

There was no need to ask who he was talking about; she already knew.

The next call was to Barbara, letting her know that John Diggle said he’d be in touch and to expect his call and also to finalize their dinner plans the next day. Bruce would begin his nighttime activities soon so she got off the phone quickly to allow Barbara to begin her prep.

She looked at her phone, noting the time, and before she could stop herself she had dialed his number.

There was a sharp inhalation of breath followed by a familiar sleep-laden voice, “Hello?”

For one panicky moment, Felicity considered going middle school and hanging up then and there. Instead she answered him, “Oliver?”

She heard the rustle of sheets, “Are you alright? What’s happening?” His voice went from sleepy to fully alert in an instant.

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “I—I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—I, um, I didn’t realize you were asleep. It’s still pretty early so I thought you might be in the Lair or something.”

“No,” he said quietly. “Dig convinced me to lie low for a few days until Wayne’s people got here so I was just catching up on some sleep.”

“Is, um, how is everything?” She stammered nervously, suddenly not sure of what she should say at that moment.

“Felicity, just…why did you call me?” She heard the rustle of sheets as he sat up in bed.

“I, um, I talked to Bruce. He offered me the alternate Watchtower site but I don’t know if I’m taking it yet.”

“I know; he told me he was going to ask you.”

“Oh,” she said softly. “Um, what do you think?”

“Why ask me?” He said with an edge of annoyance then sighed, “Look, I’m not happy about you working with Wayne but if he needs you for his mission you should do it; you need to start moving on with your life even if that means moving on with him.”

Her jaw dropped slightly and her heart clenched at his cold tone as he spoke to her, “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Look, Felicity, I really don’t have time for—”

“I just—I need to know,” she paused, “are you….are we really over, Oliver?”

“Felicity…”

“I mean, I know it was just one night and I’m not asking for more than that. I’m not; I’m not calling
about that but I just…” She tightened her grip on the phone. “It just feels like everything is moving too fast and suddenly I’m here and things keep moving forward and what if I just want to come home?” She said in a rush, “I don’t…” She bit her lip, “Yeah, I just want to come home. What if I don’t want to run Watchtower and live in Gotham for the rest of my life? What if I could figure out a way to fix this--?”

“You can’t; there isn’t a place for you here anymore,” Oliver said cutting her off. “Look, it was nice hearing from you but I should go—"

“Wait, Oliver!” she said quickly.

For a second she thought he might have hung up but then he began to speak again, “Felicity,” Oliver’s voice was tense, “I just think that it would be best if you…” He let out a breath, “I just think it would be best if you moved on and you calling me like this isn’t helping. You have to stop thinking that this is temporary and realize that you need to stop living in the past and move on; from me—us, from the team. Move on with your life away from Starling and the Arrow.”

“I can’t move on,” she told him.

“You have to.”

“But I’m coming back, Oliver. I mean, I have to eventually, right?”

“No.”

Her cheeks flushed as she heard the grim finality to his tone. She shook her head as if to clear it, “Listen, I get that whatever we had was a one-shot deal, okay? I get that it was just a one night stand; I can deal with that and I’ll never bring it up again if you don’t want me to but you need me there. The team needs me there.”

“We don’t! We don’t need you anymore; I’m sorry to be blunt but I don’t know how else to get that through your head,” Oliver said irritably.

“That’s not—damn you, Oliver!” She nearly shouted into the receiver. “You’re being a real asshole right now! Barbara and Tim are just coming down there until this blows over! Eventually I’m going to have to—"

“No,” he repeated.

“Oliver--!”

“Look, this is the way it is. I’m sorry but even if they go back...” He paused again, “When you found out a contract had been taken out on your life you didn’t tell me; why?”

“What?” She asked, taken aback by the sudden shift in the conversation.

“Why didn’t you tell us about the contract someone put on your life the minute you heard about it? Why did we have to hear it from Wayne days after you were told? You knew about it for almost a week and you didn’t say a goddamn word!”

She bit her lip, “I didn’t…I would have told you but Bruce—”

“No!” He said cutting her off, “It had nothing to do with Wayne or his mission. You could have told us, told me about the contract but you didn’t; why?”
“It had been canceled,” she said quietly. “It had been over and done with; it didn’t matter anymore.”

“It mattered!” He said angrily. “You knew it would matter! That’s not why you didn’t tell me. Why didn’t you share that knowledge with the team, Felicity?”

She didn’t say anything, couldn’t say anything.

“When you heard about the contract, checked the timeline, what was the first thing that went through your head?”

“Oliver…”

“You thought it was my mother, didn’t you?” He asked.

“Yes,” she said in an almost inaudible whisper of sound as the tears she had been holding back began to fall.

“So did I. So did Dig. The second we heard about it that’s exactly where our minds went and you didn’t tell me because you knew…” His voice faltered.

She bit her lip, “She’s dead, Oliver. I didn’t see the point of adding to everything else you and Thea have had to deal with.”

“That wasn’t your call to make!” He said angrily, “Goddamn it Felicity, you lied to me!”

“No, I didn’t,” she insisted.

“No, what you did was almost worse!” He told her. “You deliberately kept things from me just like she did.”

“I thought…I thought I was protecting you,” she said weakly.

“So did she,” he said coldly. “And you saw how well that worked out and yet you did it anyway.”

He made an irritated noise, “The worst part is that you were wrong; we were wrong. Moira didn’t arrange the hit which means someone else did and until we find out who that was you’re still in danger.”

“What?” Felicity asked in surprise, “Who else could it have been?”

“I don’t know; that’s the problem. After my mother, we investigated Walter next but he was a dead end as well.”

“Walter?” She asked faintly, “He never would have—"

“No,” Oliver told her, “Don’t confuse your loyalty with his. You happened to get lucky but it could have easily gone in the opposite direction. This isn’t a game, Felicity! You spent almost four years with us and you still haven’t gotten over that naïveté of yours! People who are desperate do desperate things and you didn’t give us the information we needed to keep you safe!”

“I’ve known Walter for most of my life—!” She started to object.

“But we didn’t know that, did we?” He shot back cuttingly. “It was a logical assumption for us to make since we didn’t have all the facts. You made sure of that! Either way, had you given us the information we could have eliminated him as a suspect much sooner and we might actually have had the answers we needed before Batman showed up!” Again his voice reverberated with anger.
Felicity swallowed, sensing he might have a point. That hurt though, the idea that someone she risked her life for would kill her over someone else’s secret. “Who took the contract out then?”

“No clue,” Oliver told her. “I even used my Bratva contacts but the client is a ghost.”

“Oh,” she said quietly. “So where do we go from here?”

“We don’t go anywhere,” he said harshly, “Dig and I will handle things on our end while Wayne does his thing. You’re out.”

“Oliver—!”

“No!” He said in a near shout. “You have too many secrets, Felicity. I learned more about you in a ten minute conversation with Walter than I learned from you in four fucking years thinking you were my partner; that you were one of the few people I could trust with my life and my secrets! Now I find out that I can’t trust you after all and that’s going to get you killed so you’re going to stay out of this.”

“That’s bullshit!” She told him. “I’ve never lied to you, Oliver! Not once; not even when lying to you was the smart move.” Her breath caught in a strangled sob, “If this is because of Bruce then you should just come out and say that instead of trying to make it about your mother or some stupid contract that doesn’t even exist anymore!”

“It’s not about Wayne,” he said raggedly, “Because of whatever this is between us, you never would have told us about that contract. You would have risked your life, denied us the opportunity to save you knowing your death would have crippled our mission, because you can’t function within the team anymore. This isn’t the first time you’ve done this either. You’re too emotionally invested to be trusted and that makes you dangerous.”

“And you aren’t?” She demanded. “Because if you weren’t emotionally invested then you wouldn’t be exiling me like this, would you? If it was just another one night stand and I was just another nameless, faceless lay then you wouldn’t be acting like this!”

“Fine, you want me to admit it? Okay then, you’re right; you have always been more, meant more, you’ve always gotten under my skin and affected me differently than anyone else which is why I stayed away as long as I did but that changed the minute we slept together! I would have put an arrow through Walter if I thought he tried to hurt you. Hell, if Moira was still alive I would have put one in my own mother’s chest for you, Felicity.” Her breath caught as she realized he was being completely serious. “I would have done that and more and I never would have looked back had she or anyone else tried to hurt you. The fact that you lied, the way I reacted when I found out…it just helped cement what I already knew, what I have known for a while now; I’m in too deep with you which is the biggest reason of all for not letting you back in.”

“But you wouldn’t have hurt Walter; it would never have gotten even as far as it did if I was there!” She insisted. “I would have stopped you!”

“No, you couldn’t have stopped me,” he said firmly, “because you’d be dead and I would have gone on a bloody rampage as a result.” He paused, “You used to tell me every time I let someone get under my skin to get my head out of my ass and get in the game. This is me getting back in the game and getting my head straight: You’re dangerous, Felicity, because you make me dangerous. I can’t trust myself around you and I can’t do what I have to do if you’re in my life. As long as you’re here you aren’t safe in Starling City and you never will be.”

“I’m fine though!” She said, sitting up in the bed. “Oliver—“
He cut her off, “No, Felicity, you’re done. We’re done. I’m sorry but there isn’t a place for you here anymore.”

Her breath caught in her throat as his words impacted on her like a closed fist to the gut, “What are you saying? That everything I’ve done for the past four years doesn’t mean anything? That what you told me that night…you said you were in, Oliver. You can’t tell me that you were lying because I saw the look in your eyes; it was real! And even if I’m wrong, even if it didn’t mean anything, you said we were a team; that I was your partner! You, me, Dig; we’re a team. I helped build the team with you Oliver; it’s mine just as much as it’s yours! More than that, you’re my home—the Lair, that basement, you guys…that’s my home,” she said the last of it with a pained sob.

He paused and she could hear him breathing heavily on the other end of the line. “We’re not your home, Felicity; you’re home now. Gotham, your family; that’s your home, not us!” He made an aggravated sound, “I can’t do this, I’m sorry. I can’t be with you and be the Arrow and frankly,” he paused. “I’m choosing the Arrow, not you; it’s too much. I’m telling you it’s over, that you need to find a life in Gotham. Wayne cares about you, and you…you love him. Find your place there.”

“So that night really didn’t mean anything after all?” Felicity asked quietly, hating herself for the tremble in her voice. “It really was just another night for you?”

“It meant…more than it should have but I have to move on and so do you.” His voice gained in strength, “You’re done here Felicity, it’s over. Don’t come back to Starling because if you do…” he paused, “If you do you won’t be welcomed back. I’m sorry but you’re out.”

“No!” She almost shouted at him through the phone, “You don’t get to make that decision for me!”

“I just did. Live your life, Felicity. Be happy.”

“Oliver—”

“Good bye.”

She stared down at the phone in her hands as she struggled to get her emotions under control. Pain, white-hot agony surged through her chest and she had to get out of the bed and wash her face in the bathroom sink before she could calm down enough to face what had to be done.

She looked at her pale features in the mirror, her eyes reflecting the pain she felt at Oliver’s rejection. He was right, she knew that. She shouldn’t have called; not if they were being targeted but…

She shook her head and dried her face with a towel before going back into her bedroom and shaking off her melancholy so she could make the last call on her list. Until that very moment she wasn’t sure if she’d have the strength to make the last call but her brief conversation with Oliver merely proved that she couldn’t afford to hold off on it any longer.

If this was ever going to end then she had no other choice.

“Miranda Tate.”

“Hi Miranda, it’s Felicity Smoak. We met the other day at Killinger’s.”

“Yes, of course!” She said in a bright tone, “I was hoping you’d call. Have you decided to join our organization after all?”

“I wouldn’t say that but I wouldn’t mind discussing it with you some more; at your office perhaps?” Felicity said cautiously.
“Sounds perfect,” Miranda said and paused as though looking through her schedule. “I think I can shift a few things around…can you be here at, say, 9:30?”

“Sure, where’s ‘here’?”

“The East End six blocks down from Park Row on the docks. We converted the old Axis Chemical Processing Plant and turned it into an office building.”

Felicity couldn’t help but chuckle a little, “Stellmoor set up their offices right behind Crime Alley?”

“Not Stellmoor; the Orbital Organization,” Miranda corrected her. “Stellmoor has offices uptown in a nice shiny skyscraper on 47th Street but I’m assuming you’re interviewing for the job Isabel told you about and not the one that involves pushing papers all day long.”

Felicity felt a bit gobsmacked for a moment. “The Orbital Organization? As in, um…”

“As in our charitable organization,” Miranda said with a certain emphasis. “I’d rather not discuss the details on the phone but I thought it would be best to cut through a lot of the dancing and hoopla and show you exactly what it is we’re doing. Still interested?”

“Yeah, uh yes! Absolutely! See you then,” Felicity said quickly before they both hung up. She let out a nervous breath and opened up her dad’s modified laptop and began a search. If she was going to meet the enemy on their home turf she was going to need to come prepared. At least now she had something to go on.

A name: The Orbital Organization.
Felicity took a cab to the East End and tipped her cabbie generously. Even in broad daylight there weren’t many people who liked to venture into this part of Gotham. When she told the Jamaican cab driver who picked her up in front of Wayne Tower where it was she was going he exclaimed in a strong patois, “A what you feel like, woman! Not even dah Babylon Boys go up dere effin’ dey call! Is your head be gone? Fancy nice white lady like you don’t belong in dah Crime Alley!”

After much convincing along with a large portion of her pilfered Bruce Wayne cab fund he finally took her but not without a lot of grumbling and complaining. When he did drop her off he looked at the seemingly abandoned entrance to the Axis Chemical Processing Plant dubiously.

“Look here, Missy,” he said shaking his head. “I don’ know you but you don’ belong in here. I tink maybe I should take you back to your fancy building, cha!”

“Thank you but this is where I’m supposed to be,” Felicity said as she got out of the nice safe Yellow Cab even though she secretly thought he might have a point.

“Ah, you be vexin’ me, woman!” He cursed pulling out a card and handing it to her. “Dis be mah cell phone. You call me when you ready to leave dis place, hear? You call me! Not many of dah brethren be wantin’ to come up chere, no.”

Felicity took the card gratefully, “Thank you,” she looked at it, “Mr. Mention?”

“Oh yeah, dat be me; Mr. Mention,” the cabbie said with a sly wink. “‘Cause all dah ladies be mentionin’ me, cha!”

Felicity smiled brightly and slipped the card in her purse then waved as the cabbie sped away leaving her alone. She smoothed her hands over her black wool trench coat one last time to make sure she looked alright, straightened the chocolate, black, and camel cashmere Burberry check scarf around her neck, and headed towards the gate.

She wanted to dress for success but she didn’t want to slip and crack her ass sideways on the slick asphalt either so she left the suicide heels in the closet and stuck to a simple pair of nude and black patent leather kitten heels instead. The wind whipped across her legs and she immediately wished she had worn trousers or at least a thick pair of wool tights but she needed to look sharp if she was going to leave an impression on a woman like Miranda Tate.

Under her coat she had on a Michael Kors black crepe wool dress with a high round neckline and nude contrasting ‘slits’ at the neck and torso that added an hourglass silhouette to the already form-fitting dress. It ended at the knee but was sleeveless (why designers never seemed to put sleeves on anything anymore was beyond her) so she paired it with a Balmain double breasted black wool jacket that nipped in at her waist and clung nicely to her curves as it ended just below her hips. Unfortunately the suit jacket hid the nude detailing on the torso but it did make the little peek-a-boo of color at her neckline pop and, besides, there was no way in hell she was going out in Gotham winter weather by the docks without plenty of layers.

Felicity walked up to the empty guard shack and frowned before approaching the seemingly broken and antiquated keypad at the gate that was perched atop a slightly bent and corroded steel pipe. She pushed her glasses up her nose and eyed it dubiously before raising one eyebrow in swift calculation. She then looked around her carefully. At first she thought she’d somehow gotten the address wrong but, as far as she knew, there was only one Axis Chemical Processing Plant on this side of town. At first glance the keypad looked like a piece of junk but to Felicity’s practiced eye it was readily recognizable as rather good tech that was merely disguised as a piece of dilapidated scrap iron. Once that became apparent, her eyes easily spied the no less than six micro-cams pointed straight at her, not to mention the high powered security cams on the rooftop, security light poles, and the chain
fencing that was topped with more than just razor wire. She also caught sight of a few well-disguised rooftop sentry posts and a laser tracking system.

This was definitely the place.

There was a speaker and microphone on the keypad and the sentries had her in their sights. The lasers they were painting her with might be invisible but she could practically feel them burning into her. They knew she was here, that was obvious, but no one was acknowledging her presence. Taking barely a second to consider her actions she reached into her bag and pulled out her modified cell. She flipped open the small metal flap on the keypad that revealed a laser scanner and activated the card reader app on her smartphone. Within seconds she hacked the system and the gates opened smoothly, attesting to the fact that the mechanism was in deceptively good working order.

With a blank, almost bored expression, she turned to one of the hidden cameras and said, “Tell Ms. Tate I’m here and that I’d really prefer not to get shot today if at all possible so I’d appreciate it if you could ask the snipers along the roofline to stop targeting me now.”

A clear and professional feminine voice erupted from the speaker, “Yes Ms. Smoak, Ms. Tate is expecting you. Please enter the gate and wait by the guard shack as someone is coming to collect you shortly.”

“Thank you,” Felicity said before breaching the perimeter. She steeled her nerves and pretended not to care about the fact that the roof sentries were probably still targeting her. Through her eyelashes she watched as a brief flash of sunlight filtered through the dark overcast sky to glint off the scope of a high powered rifle. Yup, still feeling like a deer caught in the crosshairs, she thought with no little amount of trepidation.

For a split second she almost panicked and allowed herself to wonder if she should have told Bruce or Barbara what she was doing or, at the very least, Tim or Luke, but had she told anyone they would have instantly gone into ‘protect helpless little Baby’ mode and she’d be lucky to ever see daylight again. Also, if Bruce had any clue that a rival vigilante group had settled in his city, especially this close to Crime Alley and in a building that had a million miles of bad history associated with it, he would have launched an all-out assault on the place. She didn’t want that to happen yet, not until she had a chance to assess this ‘Orbital Organization’ for herself. She wasn’t suicidal and she wasn’t stupid, but she was intrigued. She wasn’t going in completely wide open and unprepared either. She had multiple safety plans in place including the shielded tracker Bruce had left in her car back in Starling City that was now cleverly tucked into the underwire of her bra, a computer notification set to go off by 1:30 pm if she doesn’t disable it which would alert Watchtower of her position and therefore get the attention of every single member of the Bat Family, and lastly her phone itself. Even if one or two of her preventatives failed, the notifications would go out and someone would come for her…hopefully she’d still be alive when they did and not full of 50 caliber holes shot from high powered sniper rifles. She justified her admittedly risky plan of action with the old adage that stated that while curiosity may have killed the cat, satisfaction brought it back.

A golf cart arrived with two security guards, both armed but their weapons tucked away, and she was instructed to climb aboard. Within moments she was driven through the doors to the plant. As they entered the immense building Felicity’s mind raced at what she might see, but whatever she had been expecting it wasn’t this…

…it was empty.

Completely empty.

The golf cart slowed to a halt as it approached the two women standing in the center of the empty
floor. Miranda Tate stood beside a very well dressed and smirking Isabel as they waited for her to get off the cart and approach them on foot.

“Hello Felicity,” Isabel said with a slightly triumphant grin. “So what do you think of the place?”

Felicity, refusing to give in to the obvious, merely looked around coolly before saying, “I think that you must have a helluva set up downstairs otherwise all the security measures you’ve put in are overkill even for this part of town.”

Isabel turned to Miranda with a raised eyebrow, “I told you.”

“Yes, you did,” Miranda said with a slight nod, eyeing Felicity appreciatively.

“So have I passed the first part of your test, or what?” Felicity asked, knowing she’d need to put in a show of strength if she was going to make an impression.

“With flying colors,” Miranda said with a slow smile. “Your use of a cellphone to hack the keypad was impressive as was your ability to not only identify the hidden cameras but the sentries along the rooftop. Tell me, what other details were you able to discern?”

“Let’s see; M-82 sniper rifles with suppressors and Meslas Fire-Control riflescopes, top of the line micro cameras and keypads, a laser tracking system and net,” she pointed to the top of the factory ceiling and pointed out the tell-tale black splitters sitting atop the girders and rafters, “and, this is just a guess mind you because I haven’t checked the perimeter, but I’m thinking no less than…” she took a second to make the calculations in her head, “twelve sentries on the roof and premises plus the other two ‘visible’ security guards. Am I close?”

“Very.” Miranda said smiling broadly. “How did you know about the guns and scopes? You couldn’t have possibly seen them from that distance clearly.”

“M-82’s are some of the most accurate rifles ever made and I figured you’d be all about top of the line, suppressors because even in this neighborhood someone’s bound to respond to gunshots eventually, and the new Israeli scopes are invisible rangefinders that operate on an infrared spectrum because what’s the point of having a targeting system if the little red dot gives you away?” She said easily and without hesitation.

Miranda turned to Isabel slowly, “Expect an especially large bonus this year.”

Isabel’s eyes glittered with that strange light once more and she gestured towards the freight elevator, “Would you care to continue the rest of the tour?”

Felicity nodded and the women led her to the elevator that, despite the rusted and paint peeling exterior, opened to reveal a shiny stainless steel interior. As the doors closed a panel slid open and a computer generated voice stated woodenly, //Please stand by for entry code and scan.//

Miranda stood in front of the scanner and targeted a small dot with her eyes as she spoke, “Code Tiamat and two guests.”

//Identity Confirmed. Please stand by for scan.//

A red laser netting lit up the interior of the elevator followed by the voice of the computer once again. //Confirmed. Beginning descent.//

A few moments later the elevator stopped and the doors opened to a bustling control room that appeared to stretch for the entire length of the rather impressively large factory. One end of the room
was filled with floor-to-ceiling walls of monitors and a dozen or so computer banks and workstations, each manned by its own operator. The other end of the room was covered in training mats, sparring rings, and exercise equipment where no less than two dozen men and women were training hard as technicians in white coats walked around making notations in their handheld tablets. Along the perimeter were wood and mirrored glass enclosed ‘cubicles’, some of which had their doors wide open so that the office personnel were clearly visible behind their desks working on their computers or speaking on the phone. There was also a large medical and sports medicine area where some of the men and women were receiving massages or having minor injuries examined and treated.

“Welcome to Project Leviathan, otherwise known as The Orbital Organization,” Miranda said, her exotic features beaming with pride. “So what do you think?”

Felicity took a deep breath, her eyes wide open as she tried to take it all in.

“Wow.”

Diggle glared at his partner from his spot near the workstation. Even though it was a weekday Oliver was working hard in the Lair. He’d taken a nasty beating the night before so he called in sick because even those miracle herbs of his took time to work. By Monday he’d be fine but today he was sporting a nasty bruise along his jaw line and a black eye, not to mention the bruised ribs he’d received when he’d gone in blind and tried to face down half a dozen heavily armed Triad members alone. Oliver looked more like a brawler than a CEO at the moment but it could have been worse; if he and Roy hadn’t gone in at the last minute he would have been dead.

Even so, here he was, preparing to begin the second part of his workout, bruised ribs or no. The CEO might have called in sick but the Arrow only did so if he were at Death’s door.

“We can’t keep going on like this. I thought you agreed to take the night off last night otherwise we would have been there to back you up a hell of a lot sooner! What the hell were you thinking?”

Oliver looked up at Diggle and sighed, “I just—I wasn’t exactly planning on running into a gang fight, Dig! I was just blowing off some steam and it happened, sorry.”

“That’s not all I’m talking about and you know it,” he said, throwing him a pointed look. “You’re tired, you’re slipping up—“

“I’m fine,” Oliver bit out. “We were doing this before Felicity and we’ll manage now that she’s gone.”

“You two are both full of shit,” the other man muttered as he turned away from him.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Oliver asked angrily.

Dig turned to face him again, his eyes narrowing. “She called me last night right before you nearly got killed by a bunch of pissed off gangbangers while ‘blowing off steam’, whatever the hell that means.”

Oliver didn’t say anything. Instead he began to remove his weapons and return them to the racks.

“She asked how the mission was going, if I was handling everything okay; you know what she didn’t ask?”

The question hung in the air and Oliver took off his gloves waiting for Diggle to continue, irritation
at the other man pricking at him. Finally, sick of the silence that hung over him like a sharpened pendulum, he gave in. “Fine! She didn’t ask about me, right? And now you’re reading all kinds of shit into it! Well, just stop okay? She’s gone and life goes on.”

“Think so?” Dig asked him.

“Has to,” Oliver said quietly. He took off his gloves and slapped them on the metal table in front of him. “Fuck!” He nearly shouted in frustration.

“It’s okay to miss her, Oliver,” Diggle said quietly. “Hell, I miss her.”

“If you miss her so bad then help me, Dig!” Oliver yelled at him. “Help me get rid of the threat hanging over us and maybe that will change things but until then just get off my goddamned back!”

“You’re taking risks, you’re not sleeping, and you’re foul tempered and on edge! You’re going to blow everything we’ve worked for if you keep up this shit!” Diggle rose from the chair and confronted him, looking at him dead-on as he spoke. “You keep losing your temper at work, too. You’re going to tip Isabel off, Oliver.”

“She’s not even there,” he said as he jerkily took the tape off his knuckles. “She took off yesterday to meet with her bosses at Stellmoor. Besides, what the hell do you want me to do about it, Dig?” He growled in frustration. “I’m doing the best I can with what I’ve got!”

“Stop being the Arrow until we get some back up and mean it this time! No more of this going off on your own shit!” Dig said stubbornly. When Oliver opened his mouth to protest the other man stopped him, “It’s only for a few days, right? Just hang it up for a week, one week, and then we’ll be back up and running. Get some sleep, eat something, stop running yourself in the ground.”

“I have responsibilities; Roy, the city——“

“They can wait a week,” Dig told him. When he didn’t answer Dig shook his head and placed his hand on the other man’s shoulder, “At least call her.”

Oliver stiffened and shook his head, “No.”

“Why not?” He said dropping his hand and scowling at him.

Oliver ran a hand over his mouth, his eyes twin pools of pain as he spoke up, “Just no.”

“She wants to hear from you. She hasn’t said so but I can——“

“No!” Oliver said tightly, slamming his hand on the table hard enough to leave a dent. He turned his back on his partner, stepping away from the table as he got his emotions under control. “She called me,” he said quietly. “Last night, after she spoke to you.”

“What did she say?” Dig asked, his tone darkening as he easily guessed from Oliver’s tone and mannerisms that the story he told wouldn’t end well.

“She wants to come home; I told her no, that she had to move on with her life;” Oliver said in an almost dispassionate tone. “I also told her not to call me again unless it was an emergency.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” He thundered, incensed to the point that he seriously considered beating the man in front of him to a bloody pulp. “Call her back right now and--!”

“This is not a love story, Dig,” he growled, rounding on him. “There is no happily ever after, no
whispered promises over a candlelit dinner! She can’t come back! Not now, not ever! Felicity is gone! Whether we fix this or not, she’s gone."

Dig shook his head, “She’s coming back as soon as this is over. She about hinted as much to me over the phone. She kept talking about her computers and some of the ideas she had to update the system—not Barbara, her. She even fucking told you she wanted to come back! You said so yourself; she called this place her home, Oliver! You, me, the mission—this is her home!”

“This isn’t her home,” Oliver said wearily. He sat down heavily in one of the chairs and scrubbed his hands over his scalp. “This is a basement; it’s not a home. She has a home in Gotham with a father and a brother and sister…and him.” He looked up at his friend, a weary smile on his face, “I sent her away, Diggle.”

“You were protecting her,” the other man said quietly. “You had no other choice.”

“I had a choice,” he snorted. “I chose to send her away with him though.”

“So he could protect her.”

Again Oliver shook his head, “He’ll never give her back and I knew that when I pushed her out. No matter what happens she’s gone. I blew it, Dig, and I have to live with that.”

“Felicity’s loved you for years, Oliver,” the older man said, breaking the unspoken rule between them that the words ‘love’ and ‘Felicity’ should never been spoken out loud in the same sentence.

“And she’s loved him even longer,” Oliver said making an exasperated noise deep in his throat. “I was his stand-in; that’s all. And Felicity,” he shook his head, “I don’t know; maybe it was just proximity or the fact that the tension just got to be too much to handle. Whatever we had it wasn’t love, Dig; it was never love. We’re not some destined to be bullshit romance novel. We had sex once and I immediately pushed her away. I told her to go away and there could never be a chance at a relationship with us and she accepted it. She didn’t yell or scream or cry; you know what she did?”

He looked up at him and smiled humorlessly, “She laughed. Thought it was hilarious because, come to find out later, Wayne told her the exact same goddamn thing.” He clenched his jaw, “She said I wasn’t her first rodeo, said that she’s heard all the speeches before. I didn’t understand then but I do now.”

“Enlighten me then,” Diggle said.

He eyed him sharply, “Batman has been doing this a hell of a lot longer and a hell of a lot more successfully than we have.” When Diggle looked like he was going to break in he cut him off, “We’re just beginning, sure, but he’s been doing this for as long as he has and he pushed her away because he knows from personal experience that you can’t do what we do and have that kind of life with someone. He even gave her the exact same goddamn thing. What does that tell you?”

“That Bruce Wayne is a fucking moron? That he blew it and thank God he did because now it’s your chance?” Diggle told him blithely. “I know where you’re going, man, but you’re wrong. You’re thinking that if he can’t have her and keep her then how could you ever manage to do it, right? How do you carve a life out of all this with a girl like Felicity and still be the Arrow? You know how you succeed where he failed?” Diggle leaned against the table heavily, looking at the younger man with a combination of pity and frustration. “You call her, you hop a plane, you go get her back. You tell her how you feel. You don’t fuck it up.”

“No.”
“Why the hell not?” Diggle growled.

Oliver leaned his head back and closed his eyes before answering. “I’ve ruined her life enough as it is, for one thing.”

“What the hell are you talking about now?” He asked irritably.

“She’s not the same person she was because of us, because of all this,” Oliver said, gesturing around the room. “We—I stole that from her; that lighthearted innocence she used to carry inside of her. She’s changed and I hate that it’s my fault; that I’m the reason that happened. I won’t be responsible for destroying her, Dig; not her. Sara, Laurel, Shado, Sandra—I’ve managed to ruin every single one of their lives just because they made the mistake of getting too close to me. I’m toxic; this mission, this life has devastated and destroyed every person I’ve ever tried to care about. I won’t do that to Felicity any more than I already have; she deserves better.”

“Just—people change, okay!” Dig burst out. “We grow older, we roll with the punches; everyone changes! You’re not the same person you were when you got on that damn boat, you aren’t the same man you were when you crawled into the backseat of her car; Felicity wasn’t forced into this, she chose it! Stop trying to turn back the clock on her life just because you feel guilty for something that wasn’t your fault!”

“But it was my fault!” He threw back, “All of this was my fault!” He said thumping himself on the chest. “She needs to go her way and I need to go mine because I can’t take one more…” He tightened his lips into a grimace, “Like I told you before; this isn’t a love story, Dig. I can’t do what I do, wear the masks I wear, and have that kind of relationship with anyone.” He sighed again and got up to unzip his jacket. “It’s better to just end it now before there’s no turning back.”

“Do you honestly think you can convince yourself that this hasn’t already taken over your life, man?” Diggle asked quietly. “You’re fooling yourself, you know that?”

“She deserves a life, Dig,” Oliver said with grim finality. “I can’t give that to her but, who knows, maybe someone else can. She deserves better than this.”

“And what do you deserve?” He asked.

“Nothing,” Oliver said. “Not a goddamn thing.”

Bruce sat in the satellite cave and played back the footage from the day before. He watched as her face broke out in a mischievous grin and listened as Felicity began her ramble outside of the penthouse doors. She pulled out her cell and swiped a card and in a matter of seconds the doors unlocked.

“One would think Batman would have better security.”

He grimaced and continued to watch as she stepped inside and peered around for a few moments, chuckling in spite of himself as she eyed the Egyptian bust suspiciously and removed her coat to cover it.

“Okay, I know how to fix you. Better.”

God, she was adorable, not to mention sexy as hell. One didn’t usually use those two words in the same sentence but that’s exactly what she was. His mind drifted back to the first time he’d seen her in QC wearing that red dress that looked like it had been painted on. She’d been sexy, yes, but sexy in
a way any other woman would have been in the same outfit. Not that he wouldn’t have given anything to bend her over that conference room table and make love to her until they both passed out but that was all her, not what she was wearing. He much preferred her when she was being herself.

He watched as the dress floated around her legs, her golden hair shimmering in the low light. She wasn’t dressed in a particularly alluring way; on the contrary, she would have fit in perfectly at a church social in the demure silk dress and simple pink cardigan. She didn’t even have in her contacts, just her ordinary, everyday thick framed glasses, but she was 100% pure Felicity; no pretension and making no effort to be anyone else. Even so, when he saw her in that dress the morning before, it was all he could do not to pick her up and sit her down on the workstation desk so he could push inside of her until she was a babbling exhausted mess.

His attention turned back to the monitor as she spoke again.

“I distinctly heard Bruce say he had my stuff delivered here.”

Again he let out an involuntary snort of laughter as she nearly jumped out of her skin at the sight of the large bronze cat sculpture.

“Nice kitty. Creepy kitty. Who did Bruce hire to decorate this place, Morticia Adams?”

He rubbed his hand over his mouth and shook his head, then winced as he realized what she was about to see.

“You’ve got to be shitting me. One piece of furniture. Seriously, one piece? Oh, he’s going to pay for that one.”

He hadn’t been too happy himself when he realized how little the movers had been able to salvage. He’d nearly called the moving company to demand an explanation before he caught the note Felicity herself had left on the paperwork. Knowing that she’d donated the bulk of her belongings because of his thoughtless actions hadn’t relieved him of his guilt; on the contrary, it made him feel even worse. More so when he found out that everything he had assumed about her was completely wrong. She wasn’t in over her head; Queen was. She was the one who stepped in to rescue him, not vice versa.

Not to say what Queen and John Diggle had accomplished with their limited resources wasn’t impressive; it was. For a two man operation to come as far as they had and not get caught or killed was a damn miracle, but he knew that without Felicity they would have never pulled it off. When they told him the story of how he’d gone to his own IT department with a bullet-ridden laptop and happened to approach the only tech in the place that wouldn’t bat an eye, he’d been tempted to call bullshit. Things like that didn’t happen in real life. Of all the people to bring it to, he found Felicity. Bruce shook his head. What was it Alfred always said? “God has a special providence for fools and the foolishly brave.”

He watched as she entered his office and seemed to suddenly perk up, her full lips curving into a sweet smile.

“Now this is more like it.”

“Because the devil himself dances among us, but we do not see him.”

The words tickled at his memory but he couldn’t immediately place them. If he was to guess he’d say Agatha Christie; Felicity was a huge fan of her books and he’d often find her curled up in a corner somewhere with an afghan and a corpse or two for company. His instincts said that it sounded more like something you’d hear from Hercule Poirot than Miss Marple but he doubted the devil she was
talking about now was a short, rotund Belgium detective with a waxed moustache, especially since she was looking directly at the silver framed pictures that crowded the mantle.

“And speaking of the devil.”

As she began to pick up and examine the framed photos of his childhood he averted his eyes, his mood turning grim. There was just something so intimate about that space, so…personal. She moved fluidly within it, picking up one frame after another, smiling softly at each and every one. He couldn’t do that; not anymore. They weren’t just memories in a frame for him, they were his ghosts. His reminder of all he couldn’t fix, all he had yet to do, and every past and future failure. In his mind’s eye he could still see his mother with crystal clear clarity; her pale gold hair, nearly the same shade as Felicity’s was now, coming undone from her once neat up-do because she’d nodded off in the theater, her long slender fingers as they gripped his hand lightly, her sweet smile as she looked into his father’s eyes--

“She was so young, wasn’t she? I always forget how young they were when you lost them.”

Bruce started slightly, his eyes locked on the image of Felicity as she seemed to speak directly to him through the monitor. It was almost as though she sensed exactly what it was he was feeling at this very moment.

“She was, what, twenty-five? Twenty-six?”

“Twenty-seven,” he found himself answering softly even though, logically, he knew that everything he was seeing happened the day before. Still, he answered her.

He watched as she picked up his father’s old pipe and inhaled then turned her eyes to his photograph.

“Cherry pipe tobacco. You look like your dad. He couldn’t have been much older than you are now.”

“Pretty close; he was just a few years older, forty-eight,” Bruce admitted. Had he gone through with his mad idea and actually married Felicity four years ago (assuming she would have had him), would they have a child of their own by now? It was possible.

His mother wasn’t even nineteen when he was born; slightly younger than Felicity had been when they made love for the first time. Still, it wouldn’t have worked out, he reminded himself. Damian had been out of control, almost impossible to deal with. It was bad enough when he targeted Tim because he saw him as a potential rival. Had he brought Felicity into his home and had they had a child…

He swallowed and quickly dismissed the darkness that threatened to overtake him. Damian was gone. Best to let sleeping dragons lie.

“I wonder if Martha fussed at him as much as Peggy fusses at Lucius when he comes home smelling of pipe smoke? I bet she said, ‘Thomas Wayne, a doctor should know better!’”

He nodded, more to himself than anything else, “She did, but then she’d get him a new Wemyss hand carved pipe every Christmas shipped all the way from Dunfermline, Scotland.”

“I bet he’s the reason Lucius still smokes, not often, but every once in a while. He probably wore Bay Rum aftershave too, didn’t he? And he ate peppermints to try to cover the smell but it never did. Do you still remember that? What he smelled like?”
He searched his memory, “Not Bay Rum; Old Spice and…lemon drops.” He hadn’t thought of that in years. His dad always had a bag of old fashioned lemon drops in his pocket.

It had been his father’s favorite candy.

“And Martha smelled like L’Air Du Temps and baby powder too, I’ll bet, because she worked with kids.”

He nodded again silently because she was right. That’s exactly what his mother smelled like.

He watched as she caught sight of the Maltese Falcon statuette and slowly ran her fingers over the deeply embellished feathers

“The stuff dreams are made of.”

Although she spoke in a soft whisper it was as though she was speaking directly in his ear. He felt a bolt of desire surge through his body, straight to his groin. There was nothing sexual about her words or her body language but somehow it was the most erotic, most intimate act he’d ever been witness to.

This woman knew him.

She knew him.

He watched as her face turned to the hidden camera and she stared straight through him, her lips curving upwards in a tongue-touched grin, “Bruce, Bruce, Bruce; shame on you.”

His heart nearly stopped.

“The least you could have done was make it a little bit of a challenge. Why, this is almost too easy.”

He stiffened in his chair.

“Okay Sam, let’s talk about the Black Bird, shall we? Where’s your MacGuffin?”

He blinked and began to breathe again as she reached inside the clock.

“Bat. Now that is what I call a MacGuffin.”

As the secret panel opened revealing the elevator and palm scanner he groaned, half in humiliation and half in frustration, listening as she berated him from the past.

“Okay, well, I see where you decided to put the security now but, seriously, ‘Bat’? You had to use a bad pun to hide your secret cave-thingy? She was the goddess of cows, not bats; that just happened to be her name.”

He switched it off, unable to take anymore.

He remembered her words:

“…despite what you may think, Bruce; you’re not that hard of a read.”

Apparently not.

He closed his eyes and rubbed his furrowed brow with his hand as he leaned back in the chair.
“Fuck,” he said out loud, enjoying the taste of the profanity as it rolled off his tongue.

Fuck, he thought. He was so …fucked.

It was like he couldn’t…compartmentalize his feelings where she was concerned. He could do that with everything and everyone else, but she hit him where he lived. He didn’t like it; he didn’t like the way he couldn’t control himself around her, couldn’t think clearly where she was concerned. He found himself acting out of character and behaving irrationally.

He was both more and less around her, if that made any sense. It was like there was some outside force, some energy surrounding her that affected his feelings and emotions, clouded his judgment, and made him behave in ways and feel things he’d never allowed himself to feel or act upon before. He didn’t like it; it was the reason he’d pushed her away twice, but it was also the reason he kept going back.

And Felicity…she was different now; stronger, harder, more mature and confident than she’d been before she left four years ago. It was as though there was something inside of her that had changed and it both intrigued and disturbed him. At the same time he could still see the girl she’d once been, but there was a different light around her now. She wasn’t as innocent as she’d once been. Her experiences with Queen and his mission had obviously had an effect on her and that hint of darkness that had taken hold worried him. He didn’t like not knowing and he didn’t like that she made him feel so off-balance all the time. It felt like every time she looked at him now there were secrets in her eyes, like she knew something he didn’t and he wasn’t used to feeling as though he were always two steps behind. He knew it was what made him keep lashing out and now...Christ, he was so goddamn confused it wasn’t even funny.

Barbara had called him every variation of ‘asshole’ there was throughout the years but he’d never felt like one until he saw the pain he caused Felicity reflected in her eyes. Other people’s feelings never mattered to him more than the job at hand, they could like it or lump it as far as he was concerned, but she was always the exception. Women...he enjoyed women but sex was what it was, take it or leave it. The closest he’d ever come to truly loving a woman before her was Selina and, like the cat she had stylized herself after, she had been highly independent and made it very clear that their relationship began and ended on her terms, not his. When he tried pushing those boundaries; she left, simple as that.

She never truly needed him and he never really needed her either. It was a comfortable relationship for him because it was less about need and more about want. They were basically the same person and, although that probably sounded like textbook narcissism on his part; that was also what made it work. Felicity though, she was…

He rubbed his hand over his mouth and exhaled. With Felicity there was no breathing room, no emotional distance. She had a disconcerting habit of challenging him effortlessly. He wasn’t himself around her and now that she both was and wasn’t behaving like the woman he remembered he found himself feeling more confused than ever before.

“Damn it, man,” he cursed himself. He needed to get ahold of himself and get his head out of his ass once and for all.

He had a mission, he had other things to worry about besides some twenty-three year old girl who wore flirty little dresses that floated around her legs. He didn’t have time for some awkwardly adorable siren that smelled like sunshine, flowers, and home. He was both Batman and Bruce Wayne; he had a city to save, a conglomerate consisting of seven major companies to run that brought in a combined income of more than $98.5 billion dollars annually, 15,000 employees and their families that depended on him---there just weren’t enough hours in the day for him to waste
even one extra minute pursuing a girl almost eighteen years his junior!

But then, just when he thought he’d regained his footing and pushed her from his mind, she’d creep back inside his thoughts and slither her way underneath his skin.

Felicity had the uncanny ability to slip in under his radar. She could blend into the background so well that it was as though she were invisible…until she wasn’t. With just a pair of glasses and a ponytail she could hide herself in plain sight. Nothing about her ever changed; her personality remained the same, her speech never altered, but somehow…

…she could steal the breath from your lungs with just a glance…

…make you ache with need from a simple touch…

…and shatter your entire world by walking into the room.

And he was going to lose her—again—but damned if he knew what to do about it.

*\?\?\?*/

They had taken her on a tour of the facility. The scope and breadth of the organization set her mind on fire. It was, in a word, impressive.

It was as though the Orbital Organization had taken every innovation, every protocol and procedure employed by every covert government agency, military organization, and vigilante mission and combined them to create something even more magnificent but with none of the pitfalls or flaws.

They weren’t military or government so they didn’t have to worry about oversight, budget approval, or red tape.

They weren’t law enforcement so there were no concerns about warrants, diplomatic relations, or jurisdiction.

They were a vigilante group but they were better organized, better funded, and better connected than anything she had ever seen or even imagined.

This place was either Oliver and Bruce’s version of a Mask’s wet dream or their worst nightmare brought to life.

What really got her though was the computer network. She was in love.

Ass over teakettle in L-U-R-V-E.

The minute she saw what they were working with her fingers began to itch and half a dozen improvements they could employ ran through her mind. She wanted in, she wanted this so bad she could taste it…

…and if it weren’t for the fact that Isabel Rochev was a key member of the organization she would have leapt on it like a Silly Rabbit who couldn’t seem to remember that Trix was for kids.

Someone here was hiding a big old bowl of tricks…tricky, tricky, tricks; and not the kind that ended in a bowl with milk on top. She could smell it like that bunny could sniff out a fruity marshmallow; she just hadn’t found it yet.

She sat across from Miranda and Isabel in a private office, a steaming cup of coffee in her hand. The lower facility was kept at a comfortable ambient temperature so she had removed her coat and scarf
and hung them on a coatrack at the door. If she hadn’t known she was underground the office would seem rather normal if a bit more comfortable than most corporate shows of power. There was a large ornately carved U-shaped desk in a rich cherry wood finish with several monitors currently in sleep mode and a plush high back leather desk chair at the end of the room. Behind it was a two way mirrored glass wall so the person occupying the office could easily work while observing the technicians in the control room beyond. The floors were covered in plush charcoal wall to wall wool carpeting with deep, rich oriental rugs breaking up the dark monotony of the space. At the far end of the room where they sat was a large oval coffee table/conference area with rich leather seating and a plush couch with comfortable throw pillows. Low bookshelves that did not obstruct the view of the training area which was visible through the two way mirrored windows that surrounded them lined the entire space. Even the door was made from the same mirrored glass that made up three of the walls. The person occupying this office would have both privacy and an unobstructed 270 degree view of the entire facility. The final wall was covered in a light butter yellow damask that brightened the room considerably and gave the place a strong yet feminine feel. There were two doors set in the wall in the same cherry stained wood as the desk and she assumed that one led to a washroom and the other one was, most likely, a closet of some kind. Between them was a built in alcove with a small sink, countertop, and cabinets featuring a top of the line coffee maker (the same Rube Goldberg looking one Oliver had), a mini-fridge, and a small microwave.

Swear to God, she could live here.

It was a gorgeous office, at least twice the size of Oliver’s and, despite the situation she found herself in, she felt oddly at home here.

She took a sip of her coffee and hummed. Goddamn, she thought, even the coffee is impressive.

Shit. It would almost be worth joining a potentially evil organization’s underground lair if this is what they served in the employee lounge. Maybe that’s the real reason Darth Vader crossed over to the dark side; they had the good coffee while the rebels had to get their fix at Starbucks.

“So, any questions?” Miranda asked as she took a sip from her own cup.

“You called this ‘Project Leviathan’; why ‘Leviathan’?” Felicity asked. There were a lot of other questions she could have started with (Are you an evil organization bent on world domination? Am I free to leave when we’re done or are you planning on locking me in a cage where I will spend the rest of my days chained to a wall and answering the phone with the words ‘have you tried rebooting the device’? Do you grind your own beans and where can I buy some?) but the question of why they would choose to name their supposedly good guy organization after notorious evil entity just begged to be asked. “Of all the names you could have chosen, why that one? Also why call it ‘project’ anything? Are you military, ARGUS, what?”

“We’re not ARGUS or military. As for ‘Leviathan’…” Miranda smiled, her eyes glinting in pure delight, and she began to quote, “Nothing on earth is its equal—a creature without fear. It looks down on all that are haughty; it is king over all that are proud.”

“The Book of Job,” Felicity said when she was done.

“Very good,” Miranda nodded. “Are you religious at all, Felicity?”

“Not particularly,” she said. “I’m Jewish and I have had some religious instruction, I was Bat Mitzvahed and we observed the High Holidays but, honestly, it was more about tradition than faith for us.” She shrugged, “I did always have an appreciation for the stories though, the elegance of the traditional language, so I recognized the passage.”
“What do you know about the Leviathan?”

She searched her memory, “It was a seven-headed serpent from mythology that originated with either the Sumatrans or the Babylonians and became synonymous with a great and terrible evil.”

“But do you know the original story?” She asked, then instead of waiting for her answer she continued. “In the beginning there were two Leviathans; a male, Abzu, and a female, Tiamat. Tiamat was the mother of the cosmos, the mother of everything. She was the supreme goddess who reigned over the salt of the oceans and her consort was the god of the fresh sweet waters. Of the two she was the most powerful so the other gods feared her, feared her feminine power and strength; especially after she looked upon them and realized they were a blight on the cosmos and decided to destroy them all in order to silence their pettiness. Marduk, a young but ambitious deity, decided to battle his ‘great mother’ so he could take the mantle of supreme god for himself. After a fearsome battle he defeated her but he used her body to create the world and her tears to create the great rivers.” She took a sip of her coffee before continuing. “Different religions took up the tale, changed it to fit their own views. The Jews and the Christians took the myth and changed it only slightly; still with two leviathans, only this time as beasts instead of gods, and the female was still slaughtered because God feared her power. Also, instead of turning her flesh into the world, she was made into a feast to be devoured at the end of days.” She smiled, “The irony hidden within the myth, whichever one you choose to believe, is that even in death she won. Tiamat became the mother of the world because, like all women, she adapted to her circumstances. Her strength was her ability to create and nurture whether it be as food for the gods or as the Earth Mother we stand upon. We chose the codename ‘Leviathan’ for this project, not because it represents some great evil or a goddess of chaos, but because it represents feminine power and strength. No matter how many times you strike us down, no matter what the odds against us may be, we will rise again and we will take our place as the true shapers of this world.”

Isabel nodded and took up where she left off, “Men have always led with their fists, always conquered rather than compromised, and they have always feared feminine strength because where they destroy a thing we create one.”

“Exactly,” Miranda enjoined. “We’re not man-haters, we’re not saying all men are evil, but in the world around us, the world of heroes, we’re seeing the emergence of these god-like beings and creatures of pure will and strength that, while doing good and necessary work, are all too often driven by testosterone and rage. There is no order to their efforts and no acknowledgement of the collateral damage that is left in their wake.”

Isabel’s lips curled in disdain, “What’s worse is that even when these so-called heroes do target wrongdoing they only seem to target what they consider to be the big bad, ignoring everything else around them or dismissing it as being ‘not their concern’.”

Felicity felt a pang at that. Yes, in the beginning Oliver had the list and nothing but, however after the Undertaking he began to take on more and Bruce had always served all of Gotham, not just Crime Alley even if the East End was where he spent much of his time. “I don’t think that’s being very fair,” she said, unable to keep silent. “These men and women sacrifice blood, time, and their own lives to do good wherever they can. There’s no way they can possibly do everything on their own.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Miranda said, her eyes lighting up again. “We first formed Leviathan and then the Orbital Organization specifically to help with that. Look out there, what do you see?” Felicity looked out onto the training area where men and women were busily lifting weights, practicing fighting stances and sparring, as well as practicing with various weapons. “There may be more women than men out there but there are men. We aren’t discriminating here. When we began
the OO we recruited both men and women and 99% of the time the women we approached immediately saw the value of what we were doing. The male vigilantes—"

“We were lucky if a third of them showed any type of interest and those who did immediately wanted to make it a one man show and completely take over,” Isabel interrupted with an eye-roll.

“Unfortunately she’s right,” Miranda said in a disgruntled tone. “That or they wanted to pick and choose who they worked with and what battles they were willing to fight.”

Felicity flushed in embarrassment because, yeah, she could actually sympathize on that one. All the vigilantes she had known had one thing in common: They were all highly—

“Territorial macho idiots!” Isabel spat out as though reading her mind.

“So what exactly is your mission statement? What do you do differently?” Felicity asked. “And which is it; Leviathan or The Orbital Organization?”

“Both,” Isabel told her. “Most of our assets and operators know us as Orbital; it’s also the name of our charitable front. ‘Leviathan’ is the codename reserved for our top operatives; the people in charge.”

“Like Tiamat, we have many minds working as one; many heads, one body, i.e. Leviathan. Think of it as the name of the secret organization within the secret organization. As for how we’re different; first off, we’re organized and we’re global,” Miranda said leaning forward slightly. “We treat our individual operators like independent contractors. We do send them out in teams when they’re needed but, most of the time; we let them do their own thing. Most of the men and women in this facility at the moment are ‘in house’ recruits who get sent in as back up when one of our operators needs assistance but some are independent operators who occasionally like to use our facility for training or to touch base on neutral ground. We don’t require our operators to headquarter from our facility; we just ask that they take on the occasional group assignment. Everything is voluntary and, to my knowledge, no one has ever refused an assignment. We’re not trying to ‘control’ anyone here. No one punches a clock; no one is being blackmailed, tracked, or chipped. We make contact, offer assistance, and if they take us up on our offer we bring them in and see to it they get what they need. If they refuse or appear unreceptive, we back off and keep out of their way.”

She put down her cup, “Let’s face it; each of them got involved in the fight for a reason and they’re all territorial to a certain extent. They each have families, homes, friends—there is a reason they choose to fight the way they do and we acknowledge that. We give them the financial and tech support they need to get it done the way they work best with minimal input and interference.”

Miranda paused for a moment. “My management philosophy has always been that a good manager isn’t a boss, they’re an assistant. It’s our job to guide and occasionally correct but, for the most part, our job should be to help our people shine by allowing them to play to their strengths.”

“So you’re basically applying a business philosophy to a paramilitary organization,” Felicity bit her bottom lip as she tried to find a flaw in her logic. “I have to say, I actually can see where you’re coming from.”

“Of course you do,” Miranda chuckled. “You’ve already been doing the exact same thing we’re doing here only on a smaller scale; first with Batman and later with Arrow.”

Felicity froze. She couldn’t have stopped the look of surprise that must’ve flashed across her expression if she tried.

“I’m sorry,” Miranda said with a wince. “I shouldn’t have just blundered into it like that but, yes, we
do know about your involvement in both men’s missions as well as their identities. We’ve known about Oliver Queen’s role as the Arrow since the first month he returned from the island of Lian Yu and we’ve known about Bruce Wayne for years now.”

Felicity felt a little sick and suddenly the coffee that tasted so wonderful a few minutes ago was slowly inching its way back up her throat. “How?” She choked out, not even bothering to deny it. Everything from Miranda’s mannerisms to her matter of fact speech patterns declared that she wasn’t bluffing or taking a stab in the dark. They had her dead to rights.

“You aren’t the one responsible for the leak,” Miranda said kindly, placing a warm hand briefly on her own before sitting back with a sigh. “We already knew about both men long before you came on the scene. If anything they blew your cover, not the other way around.”

“For which we’re very grateful,” Isabel added dryly. She gave Felicity a level look, “You were good enough that I honestly never even looked twice at you the entire time I was observing Oliver. Until that morning that we came to our ‘understanding’ in Oliver’s office, I had completely overlooked you.”

“So you were spying on Oliver,” she said, pouncing on it.

Isabel shrugged, “Not spying as much as observing,” she corrected her. “We were aware that Starling had a problem and when the Arrow emerged we saw it as an opportunity to make contact but we were worried because of his rising body count and the fact that he seemed to be working through a list of specific targets. It was fairly obvious he was going after anyone connected to the League but to what end we couldn’t fathom.”

“The League?” Felicity repeated slowly. Throwing caution to the wind because, what the hell, if they wanted to kill her they probably would have by now, she asked, “Since we’re on the subject, why is your name listed as being a member of the League of Shadows?”

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And in that moment, we both desired the same thing—each other.

 Aren’t you a pretty little bird?

I was just a girl when Robert came to my village in Russia.

He came for business, but he stayed for pleasure. I proved to be of far more value to him than any diamond—his ultimate jewel.

Were it not for his death, we would have built a life together—despite what family trappings lingered here in America.

And so I did what I had to do on my own—to realize our shared vision—for me to rule over Queen Industries.
Chapter Twenty-Five

Felicity sat back into the cushions of the couch and wondered what she should say next. Really what could she say; Isabel just admitted she was a member of the League. That was pretty much game, set,
and match; right? She glanced up at both women and made note of the smirk on Isabel’s face and the
look of mild irritation on Miranda’s.

“Let me guess; I’m missing some minor little detail, right?” Felicity asked warily.

It was Miranda who spoke, “Isabel is a double agent. She works for us which is why she joined the
League; to infiltrate their ranks.”

“Of course she did,” Felicity muttered reaching for her cup again. She looked down at the cold
remains and frowned. “Look, I get the feeling that this is going to require some liquid fortification so
do you mind if I help myself to another cup?” Miranda nodded and Felicity got up and went over to
the sink to rinse out her cup.

She sighed and poured herself another cup then reached in the mini-fridge for a carton of cream. She
looked at the box of creamer and shook her head, “You have no idea how much I want to believe
you guys right now. Seriously,” she held up the heavy cream before adding some to her cup and
sticking it back in the fridge, “I mean, you guys don’t even screw around with 2%, you go full out
cream. Somehow a part of me always hoped bad guys would only drink the nasty powdered crap.”
She shrugged and reached for a stirrer, “Not that I haven’t used it myself, it’s just that evil should be
all instant flavor crystals and lactose free non-fat powdered milk substitute, not freshly ground and
chock full of yummy.” She walked over to the couch and leaned back, sipping her damn fine cup of
Joe, and looked at both women carefully, “Please don’t break my heart and tell me that in order to
fuel the good fight I have to spend the rest of my life waiting in line at Starbucks.”

Isabel eyed her much in the same way she had in the restaurant, “I can’t decide if I hate you or if I
want to take you home with me and spend a great deal of time corrupting you.”

Miranda looked pained for a moment, “Isabel that is highly inappropriate.”

“Yes, it is,” Isabel practically purred as her eyes drifted over her slim figure.

Felicity cleared her throat and fought the urge to cover her vital bits with her hands. “Not to interrupt
this moment you’re having, but while you’re busy undressing me with your eyes, would you mind
explaining the whole ‘League’ thing and its connection to Stellmoor?”

“What do you know about the League?” Miranda asked.

“Not nearly enough,” Felicity answered honestly.

“Not surprising,” Miranda said. “They live in the shadows, they’re elusive, dangerous, and highly
difficult to pin down. Ra’s al Ghul, the leader, is even worse. His core supporters practically worship
him as a god, members of the League are indoctrinated into his service like it’s a cult…which, when
you get right down to it, is exactly what it is.”

“And the Orbital Organization is targeting him?” Felicity asked.

“Oh yes,” Miranda said grimly, her featured tightening into a mask of anger. “If it’s the last thing I
ever do I will see that man dead and scatter his bones to the end of the earth.”

“I appreciate the sentiment but that’s a bit extreme, don’t you think?” She quipped, noting the other
woman’s expression. “Unless, of course, this is a personal vendetta.”

“It’s personal,” Miranda told her flatly. “That doesn’t mean it isn’t necessary. Ra’s al Ghul must be
stopped—period. This world will not be safe until that man no longer lives.”
“Not to condone assassination but if all it took was a well-placed bullet to take down the League why hasn’t it been done yet?”

Miranda’s lips tilted upwards in a humorless smile, “Lots of reasons; the most pertinent being that he’s virtually immortal.”

Felicity put down her cup carefully and scooted forward, “I’m sorry, did you just say he’s immortal?”

“You’ve been around long enough to have seen things that defy explanation,” Miranda told her. “Aliens, meta-humans, super-soldiers…”

“I’ve…seen a few things,” Felicity hedged.

“Ra’s has access to something he calls the ‘Lazarus Pits’. It’s some kind of natural occurring chemical pool that has remarkable restorative powers. They can heal the sick and dying, restore the dead to life, and even act as a fountain of youth. Ra’s has used the pits for well over seven hundred years, possibly even longer.”

Felicity furrowed her brow skeptically, “And you expect me to believe that?”

“You don’t have to,” Miranda said confidently. “Ask your friend Batman, he’ll tell you the pits are real.”

Felicity looked at her askance, “And you’d be perfectly okay with me telling him that I was here today; even if I reveal everything you’d told me and everything I’ve seen?”

“I’m not going to offer you a cigarette and a firing squad if you turn down the job and, while I’d prefer to keep this confidential, I won’t stop you from telling either the Arrow or Batman what you’ve learned.” She gestured toward Isabel, “Had we thought either of them would be receptive to our offer to work together Isabel would have come forward ages ago.” She eyed Felicity curiously, “Do you think Batman or Arrow would welcome us to the neighborhood with open arms?”

They had her there, she thought disgruntledly. “Why did you infiltrate QC?” She asked Isabel, switching the subject.

“I had my reasons,” Isabel said enigmatically. “It’s a long story, quite involved, but the pertinent facts are these: Merlyn, Robert Queen, Moira Queen—all of them were League or League assets,” Isabel said easily. “Oliver ‘disappeared’ with his father and spent five years on an island that was a League of Assassins training ground. During those five years he was supposedly shipwrecked, we have intel that says he was also working with Bratva in Moscow and with Waller as a ARGUS asset. She may fancy herself a ‘patriot’ but Amanda Waller isn’t above assassination or dancing with the devil if it serves her own ends. He returns to Starling and, right about the same time Merlyn break with the League, the Arrow shows up and begins eliminating members and assets left and right.” She crossed her legs and smirked, “We weren’t sure if he was League, a vigilante, or one of Merlyn’s recruits. When QC got into financial hot water we stepped in with the idea that if he was an asset our financial support would keep him going and if he was a target we could cripple his money flow.”

The revelations about Oliver’s parents and Malcolm Merlyn weren’t all that shocking but the bit about her knowing about Russia and ARGUS was. He didn’t even share that information with them until a little over a year ago and even then it had been like pulling teeth to get him to talk. Even now she was positive he was leaving big chunks of the story in the shadows. He’d never said so but when he gave her the intel he’d gotten from ‘a source’ on Deathstroke a few years back she suspected his ‘source’ was ARGUS, especially when they found out later that he had been recruited as an agent
while he was supposedly shipwrecked. The file practically had ‘government issue’ stamped all over it. At first she thought it had been from Lyla but she never asked. She figured he’d had his reasons for keeping it on the down low. Now she had to wonder. As for the story she was weaving it made sense but she wasn’t about to just accept them at their word.

“You had sex with him,” Felicity pointed out. “Was that before or after you knew what side he was on?”

“Does it matter?” Isabel scoffed. “If you must know I was convinced by then that he was a potential asset so I seduced him, or rather I let him seduce me, to see if he would be willing to let down some walls.” She smirked, “He wasn’t, so I decided to continue biding my time. Besides, as long as I’ve been there QC has continued to flourish. As long as Oliver has Arrow business to worry about someone needs to be at the helm.”

“What is the deal between you and Ra’s al Ghul?” Felicity asked turning to Miranda.

“He murdered my family,” Miranda said flatly. “My mother, my sisters, my brother…” she closed her eyes, “even my children.”

She looked at the woman sitting across from her and tried to get a read but her body language was completely closed off. Her tone however; there was some truth there. How much though remained to be seen, “I’m sorry.”

Miranda picked up her cup and took another sip before speaking again. “It wasn’t him personally of course, although it might as well have been. He ordered the murders and that’s good enough as far as I’m concerned.” She put the cup back down on the table, “Everyone comes into this for a reason; there’s a purpose that drives them. I could talk to you until I’m blue in the face about why you should join us but either you will or you won’t. If you want in we’ll be happy to have you. You’ll be doing good work, work you love, and you’ll change lives for the better doing it.”

“Plus, and not to be crass, there is a financial aspect to it as well,” Isabel inserted.

“Financial?” Felicity asked, furrowing her brow.

“You didn’t think we would just expect you to do this for free, did you?” Isabel asked her with glittering eyes.

Yeah, she kind of did.

“You pay your assets and team members?” Felicity asked instead. “Where do...I mean, I get that Stellmoor bankrolls you, but how do you manage to launder enough cash to float this big of an operation without raising flags?”

“Good question,” Miranda said, perking up. “Stellmoor is our main cash source but we do have others. This organization also has ‘legitimate’ business fronts through Stellmoor like restaurants, gyms, various real estate holdings, as well as R&D, but you probably figured that out already so what you’re really asking is are we guns for hire.”

“Are you?” Felicity asked.

“On occasion,” Miranda admitted. “We don’t do wet work or train hitmen here though. Most of our ‘shadow ventures’ involve the government and various private agencies.”

“The government?”
Miranda nodded, “Sometimes borders have to be crossed, deals have to be made, and critical situations crop up that can’t wait for approval by some subcommittee. We can get in and out without the red tape, we can be mobilized faster, and we don’t have to worry about potential political backlash for our actions.”

“You mentioned ARGUS; what’s your connection to them?” Felicity asked them both.

“Amanda Waller and I are old friends,” Isabel said with a slow smile. “Occasionally our paths cross as do our interests.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that ARGUS does what we do only not as nicely,” Miranda answered for her. “Still, we try not to burn our bridges and occasionally we do get ‘work’ sent our way through ARGUS but, more often than not, you could consider us competing agencies. Of course, they’re mostly interested in meta-humans and aliens, not vigilantes per se; the Arrow and Batman are more of an annoyance to Waller than anything else. The new vigilante in Metropolis however…”

“He’ll be lucky if she doesn’t stick pieces of him in a jar of formaldehyde and put it on her shelf,” Isabel smirked again.

“And how does the OO feel about enhanced humans?” She needed to know because if they were targeting Oliver they could also be targeting Roy.

“We have several metas as operators,” Miranda answered simply. “Like I said before, we’re equal opportunity.”

“And they’d rather work for us than ARGUS because, whereas we put them up in corporate apartments and safe houses, Amanda prefers prison cells and lab cages,” Isabel added facetiously.

She turned her attention towards Isabel, “You seem to be pretty familiar with how ARGUS operates; is that how you became involved with all of this? Forgive me for saying so Isabel, but you never struck me as a vigilante type.”

Isabel threw her another shark-like grin, “You don’t exactly fit the type either. Are you asking me to recite the epic journey that led me to become the woman I am today?”

Felicity met her hard gaze with one of her own, “Yes.”

Isabel laughed, “Fine by me; I have no secrets.”

“However I doubt that,” Felicity told her, keeping her expression blank.

Isabel looked up at her, her smile growing colder, “I was born in a small village in Siberia; I was a slave,” she said, her eyes locked unflinchingly on Felicity’s. “I worked the diamond mines; we all did. You worked the mines from the time you were old enough to carry a bucket and when you got old enough to capture the eye of whoever was in charge you worked on your back as well. There was no school, no comforts, nothing that wasn’t given to you by the overseers. The work was backbreaking; the conditions deplorable, and the only distraction from the monotony was vodka and sex. Most of the girls in my village were pregnant by the time they were sixteen, full blown alcoholics by the time they were twenty, old by thirty, and dead before they were forty. One day the man who owned the mine came. He was a wealthy American, handsome, powerful; he was also a member of the League of Shadows. I had just turned fifteen years old and was still a virgin when I was given to him as a gift. Most of the other girls in the mines had been passed around the camp from the time they hit puberty so it was just a matter of time before it was my turn. I waited in his bed
for him to come at me with his fists and then rape me but he didn’t. He talked to me instead. He asked me about my family, my work, the conditions within the mine. He showed me pictures of his family; his son and daughter. He was quite kind to me. By the time he got around to having sex with me that night, I actually welcomed it.”

Felicity looked away from her, unable to prevent the horror she felt from crossing her expression. Isabel laughed at her, “It wasn’t as bad a fate as most girls from my village had to suffer their first time. Slow seduction on clean sheets and a soft bed is a far better way to lose one’s virginity than shoved against the side of a cart with your clothes torn away and taken from behind while a dozen men watch and wait their turn.” Her eyes glittered like black diamonds; cold and hard. “I was so grateful that I did my best to please him and, in return, when he left the next day he took me with him. When we traveled together I was his ‘ward’ and then, later, his ‘protégé’. He paid for my apartment, my education, opened doors for me and gave me a life I would never have known had I remained in that tiny village. In exchange, whenever he could escape the dreariness of his marriage to his cold society wife, he would find comfort in my bed. He groomed me to be his right hand, taught me to love him in every way he needed, and I, in turn, became everything he needed.”

“Unlike his cold fish of a wife, I indulged his every fantasy; whatever he wanted I gave him. There were no limits between us, no rules for us to follow. He could do whatever he liked and not feel ashamed afterwards. She had barred him from her bed years ago; called him a perversion of manhood and yet kept him trapped in a loveless, sexless marriage. What she denounced in him I celebrated. If he wanted to invite other men or women into our bed, I welcomed it. I did not damn him for his appetites and he, in turn, encouraged me to do the same. I made him feel more alive in our time together than he had ever felt in his entire life, until one day the wife found out about me and suddenly he was gone.”

She dropped her eyes for a moment, real emotion touching her expression for the first time. It was a mixture of pain, bitterness, and deep unrelenting sadness, “He was going to leave her,” she said confidently. “Finally, at last, he was going to be mine and I was going to be his true wife in name as well as spirit. We packed our bags, he’d called his lawyers, and we were going to leave. She’d found out about me, about our life together, and she was issuing threats as a result. She said she’d ruin him, take his company, take his children, but he was with me…until he wasn’t.” Her eyes met Felicity’s again and she could see the anger burning in the dark depths of her stare, “The daughter fell off her horse and broke her arm. She had to be rushed to hospital and he dropped everything to be by her side. I tried to remind him that she wasn’t his true daughter, that his wife had taken another man into her bed and that this child bore his name but not his blood. If he wanted a child I would give him as many as he wanted, but he loved her so he left. Just a few more days, he said. I waited, I went to the office, I went home; no word. A few days later his bitch wife confronted me at the office. She made a scene, fired me, and then had me escorted from the building. I went home and my things had been packed and removed and there were men to see that I was escorted from the property there as well. I was angry, hurt, filled with rage. He didn’t call me, didn’t say goodbye; nothing.” She paused, “For a long time I thought I hated him, but I didn’t. I loved him and he loved me. When he died just a few weeks later it was because he was looking for me, he was coming for me, and his death was her fault. Had she just let him go we could have had the rest of our lives together, but she was selfish and greedy, and could not allow him his happiness. Still, she may have taken him from me but she would never have him. He went back to her but still, he loved me. And it was love, you know,” she said to her. “On the last night he shared my bed; Robert Queen called me his one true wife and meant it.”

Felicity’s jaw dropped and she looked at her in shock, “Oliver’s father?”

Isabel almost looked amused, “Why else do you think I would have saved his company or put up with that bitch, Moira Queen, for as long as I did?”
“Moira…” Felicity frowned as she thought back to everything Oliver had shared with them in regards to the connection between Isabel and Moira. All the insults she’d spat out about Isabel over the years, all the warnings; all vague and bitter but definitely personal. As much as she hated to admit it, what Isabel was saying held within it the ring of truth. Moira was good at keeping secrets and delivering bombshells. In fact, compared to some of the stuff she’d kept from Oliver, this wasn’t even all that shocking. Unfortunately there was no way she could confirm any of it. She couldn’t tell Oliver without revealing where it had come from and she couldn’t exactly call him and ask, ‘Was your dead dad into slavery and keeping underage teenage mistresses while he indulged in bisexual orgies and was one of his playmates Isabel Rochev by any chance?’

Yeah, that would win her a few points, wouldn’t it? Oliver was already pissed at her and the last thing he needed to hear is that his mother had been keeping more secrets than they originally thought.

“She knew you were Robert’s, um,” she tried to come up with a more diplomatic word than ‘mistress’ and failed so she reworded her question, “She knew about your relationship with Robert and yet she didn’t tell Oliver; why?”

“And what would she tell him?” Isabel asked her archly. “That his father wasn’t the respectable family man that he presented to the rest of the world and risk being shamed? Not hardly. It was the same reason she wouldn’t give Robert a divorce. Oh, it was fine for her to share her marriage bed with Malcolm Merlyn and give birth to his daughter but when it came to Robert’s proclivities; varied and adventurous though they may be?” She offered her another cold smile, “No, she preferred to maintain the illusion of respectability even if it was a lie. The night his boat was lost at sea he called me. He told me he was coming to be with me. He told me that he had told her he was leaving and he meant it. He was done with her but he died before we could find each other again. Moira pretended to be the grieving widow but she knew that I knew and, every time she’d cut her eyes at me or utter an insult in my direction, I’d look her in the eye and think of all the times her husband shared my bed, how the last words on his lips were of his love for me. He was more married to me than he was to her, I promise,” She chuckled, “Every time she’d call me an evil whore I’d look her in the eye and think, I may be a whore but I’m the one Robert really loved.”

Holy Susan Lucci, she thought. Tim was right; this whole thing does sound like some kind of superhero soap opera. Next thing you know Oliver’s evil twin brother will show up out of nowhere for Sweeps Week. “So why save QC?” She asked. “Seems to me that after all you’ve been through the last thing you’d want to do is save Moira Queen and her children from financial and personal ruin.”

“I thought about letting it crumble at her feet,” she admitted. “I was still not convinced that she didn’t have something to do with his death. She was League and ruthless; murdering him was not beyond her capabilities.”

Felicity had to admit, she did have a point. “So did she kill him?”

Isabel’s lips quirked upwards, “No, someone else did. She may have contributed to his downfall but I could never prove she had a hand in it; all I ever had was my suspicions but she died before I could prove anything. I take it you have also felt the wrath of the late Mrs. Queen?”

“I wasn’t her favorite person,” Felicity admitted warily. “If Moira didn’t kill him, who did? And why save his company if you thought Moira was a killer?”

“The League killed him,” she told her. “When he left Moira he also left them and you don’t leave the League. As for why I stepped in to save QC, although I still suspected that she was the one to get in contact with them to let them know of his intentions, it was still Robert’s company and I am still Robert Queen’s true widow, whether she liked it or not. Had she not threatened to ruin him and take
away his children he would have remained with me for the rest of his life. Robert is the one who first introduced me to the League which allowed me to gain access. When they killed him for betraying his oath, I joined the League and Leviathan to see to it that his death was avenged and attached myself to QC to get the answers I needed to bring his killers to justice. I protected his company, his legacy, his son; you may have thought that I was the villain this entire time, but you were wrong. This whole time I’ve actually been doing the same thing you have; protecting Oliver from himself by protecting Robert’s legacy and seeking justice for the wrongs done to him.”

It made sense. All of it, all the pieces fit together seamlessly. Felicity’s mind swirled dizzingly as she took in everything Isabel had told her. There was a ring of truth in everything she was saying, perhaps not the whole truth, but close. “Say I did agree to work with you; what exactly would you want me to do?” She asked at last.

“What you’re doing right now only on a larger scale,” Miranda said, echoing what Isabel had told her in the restaurant. “We need someone who can lead a team, train new techs, coordinate from a secure location, and anticipate our operator’s needs. In short, we need you.”

“And where would I work? Out there in the control room?”

Miranda smiled, “There, the training area, even the field on occasion if you like. After all, it’s your show.”

“Wait…” She looked from one woman to the other, “What do you mean it’s my show?”

“We want you to run the facility,” Miranda told her.

Felicity felt her jaw drop, “But I thought you did that.”

“This location hasn’t been open long so you’re right, I have, but I’m also the CEO of Stellmoor and I have twelve other facilities besides this one to coordinate with. The OO is a global operation and I have to be on the move constantly.” She sat forward in her chair and laid a hand on top of Felicity’s and squeezed. “I know it seems a bit overwhelming and we weren’t planning on just dumping it on you all at once, I promise. I’m out of the country more often than not these days so I was hoping Isabel could act as your handler and advisor until you feel like you have a handle on everything.”

She glanced up at Isabel then back to her, “I understand you and Isabel have a rough history but I assure you that was more about her maintaining her cover than about you.”

“Don’t lie to her; I’m a bitch,” Isabel said without a hint of shame. “But I get the job done and that’s what counts.”

Miranda shot the other woman a slightly disgruntled look, “Isabel is going to have to return to Starling from time to time but she’ll be back in town at least a few times a month until you’re settled. Until then I’ll continue to run the facility from a distance and delegate.”

Felicity suddenly found herself launching into a rapid fire babble of questions, “When would you need me to start? And what are the hours? Can I have time to think about it first?”

“Slow down,” Miranda said with an amused grin. “First off, take all the time you need although sooner is always better than later. Second, expect the hours to be grueling hence the couch and dorm room set up in the corner.”

“Wait, this would be my office?” Felicity asked wide-eyed.

“Your office and your show,” Miranda nodded.
Felicity sat back on the couch in stunned silence.

“Aren’t you going to even ask about the salary?” Miranda asked her after a few seconds of intense silence.

“Uh, right, salary,” she said forcing herself back into the present. “So, how much?”

Then Miranda named a figure that had little flashing lights bursting behind her eyelids for a few seconds. She had to stop from shaking the ringing from her ears as Miranda continued to speak.

“…of course, that doesn’t include your interest as a shareholder in Stellmoor as well as bonuses and, believe me, you’ll earn them,” Miranda assured her. “This job doesn’t quit at five o’clock or come with weekends off. Of course, there are other perks as well like use of our corporate apartments, private jet, a very generous expense account, a choice of a car service or your own leased vehicle—”

Felicity stopped her, “Wait, back up; I had a mini-fugue after hearing all those zeroes you were throwing my way earlier. You mentioned that I’d be a shareholder?”

“The board is made up of myself, Isabel, and the thirteen directors of our Orbital facilities, one of which we hope will be you,” Miranda explained. “I, of course, maintain a majority shareholder status but you would have a significant voice in how things are run as a voting member of the board.”

“And it wouldn’t just be about our ‘charity’,” Isabel added. “Stellmoor and Orbital also have legitimate business interests that make all this possible like, for example, Queen Consolidated. You could still help Oliver, even if you aren’t acting as his tech or his EA, by being his advocate on the board of directors.”

She was right. If this was the real deal then she could ensure that Stellmoor doesn’t pull its financial assistance until QC could stand on its own and then, when Oliver was ready to buy back the shares, she could help make that possible.

“This…is a lot to take in,” Felicity swallowed. “It’s just so surreal.”

“Take your time,” Miranda urged her. “As long as you need. We don’t need an answer today or even next week. If I were you I’d take at least a few weeks to decide if you’re willing to take this on. If you decide it’s too much but want to contribute then we’d just be happy to have you as support staff.”

“Could I, um, try that first and see how it goes?” Felicity asked tentatively. “I already told my family I was going on a job interview so I could spare a few hours a day getting to know the setup, meeting the people here before I decide on anything permanent.”

Isabel looked to Miranda and the other woman nodded. “We have people set up twenty-four seven so you could start by just taking a shift or two during the week, and if you think it works for you, we’d be happy to welcome you on board.”

“I’m already committed to something right now but I could start next week; would that be acceptable?” She asked.

“Are you sure you don’t want to think about it a bit more first?” Miranda asked her.

“I think I need to see what it is that you do here before I can commit to anything,” Felicity told her, “but yeah, definitely.”

“Next week then,” Miranda agreed. She looked to Isabel, “I have that meeting in Spain; can you
move some things around?”

“I’m sure I can arrange that,” Isabel nodded. “Besides, the Wayne Foundation is having a charity gala that week, correct?”

“Saturday,” Felicity nodded.

“Need a plus one?” Isabel asked, that strange fire lighting up her eyes again.

Oh, what the hell? Felicity thought. She needed to keep an eye on her anyway and as long as Isabel was here she wouldn’t be causing potential problems for Oliver. “Sure, I’ll even buy you a corsage. Hope you like orchids.”

“Excellent,” Miranda said getting up from her chair and reaching out to shake her hand. “I have a lunch meeting to get to so I’ll be leaving the two of you here.”

Felicity glanced at her watch and winced, “Yeah, I need to be somewhere myself actually.” If she didn’t get out of here soon and disable that Watchtower alert she’d be dealing with a very pissed off Bat.

“I’ll walk you out,” Miranda told her as they shuffled out of the office. “Are you coming Isabel?”

“I have a few things to get done here first and then I’ll meet you at the restaurant,” she told her. Isabel placed her hand on Felicity’s arm and leaned in slightly, “I look forward to working more closely with you in the future,” she said in a professional tone but the slightly heated look she gave her was anything but.

Two can play that game. “For the record I don’t put out on the first date so watch it or be prepared to spring for lobster first,” Felicity shot back.

“Feisty,” Isabel said appreciatively and sighed, “Oh why couldn’t I have found out you were this much fun ages ago? I’m going to so enjoy getting to know you better. Much better.” She gave her one last look before heading back into the office.

Miranda watched as Isabel flounced off and shook her head as she led Felicity to the elevator. “Isabel is very good at what she does but she can be…”

“Yeah, I worked with her, remember?” Felicity said ruefully. “Eh, at least this time around the sexual harassment isn’t nearly as offensive. Before she accused me of being the office slut, this time around she’s trying to get in my pants. It’s quite refreshing actually.”

“Like I said, the job comes with a few perks,” Miranda joked back.

Miranda offered her a ride but she declined politely. She needed to disable the alarm and she didn’t want to do that under her watchful gaze. Instead she called the cabbie and waited in the guard shack until he arrived so she could do what needed to be done.

“So Missy, do you find what it is you be lookin’ for?” Mr. Mention asked in his strong patois as he pulled up.

She slipped into the back seat and smiled at him through the rearview mirror, “I’m not sure yet but it’s a distinct possibility.”

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Felicity gave the cabbie another hefty tip when he dropped her off at the WayneTech building and he, in turn, told her that he had a regular DJ gig spinning at the Irie Club located in Little Jamaica in the Lower East Side, one of the many ethnic enclaves in Gotham. He told her to drop the name ‘Mr. Mention’ at the door and flash his card to the bouncer and they would let her in with no problems.

Waving goodbye she walked into the building, her step a bit lighter even if her thoughts were more than a bit tumultuous. A large part of her wanted to pack it up and go running back to Oliver and Diggle and hide in the basement again but the rest of her knew this was her chance to actually do something real for once and she wasn’t going to blow it. She didn’t believe for a second that the OO was as above board as they seemed. Something was off there but she couldn’t put her finger on it. Maybe it was the fact that the job and everything attached to it came gift wrapped with a big old bow on top.

She could do the job, she had no doubts about that. The last couple of years in particular had changed her. When Sara returned from the ‘dead’, Felicity had been…not jealous exactly, it was more like she felt displaced. After she took a bullet for her, Sara, in gratitude, took her under her wing and began to bond with her. She trained her, convinced Diggle to do the same, and taught her the value of becoming self-empowered.

Sara.

She had to confront that issue and soon. Oliver wouldn’t do it; he was even better at running away from his emotions than she was. Felicity had a lot of mixed feelings about the other woman. On one hand, she was her friend and mentor. Sara was one of only three women she trusted implicitly (the other two being Tam and Barbara), so the idea that she could have exposed them was a particularly painful possibility. On the other hand she felt immense guilt for sleeping with Oliver knowing how the two of them felt about one another. Even though Oliver had acted like a complete utter asshole the last time they spoke and their one and done was probably all they’d ever have, she owed Sara an explanation. Yes, both of them claimed to be ‘sex friends’ and that they didn’t need monogamy to love one another but she also knew that they were so much alike it was ridiculous. If there wasn’t so much ‘bad road’ between them (to quote Oliver) they could be epic, but it just wasn’t in the cards for them right now. Sara was a free-spirit and she needed to roam and Oliver was stuck in one place, both mentally and emotionally.

She thought about her conversation with Oliver again. As hurt as she had felt at the time she knew he was just lashing out and that he didn’t mean any of it. Oh, he was definitely pissed, but she knew it was less about her keeping the contract a secret and more about the fact that she was again in the line of fire. Ever since Slade came back into their lives six months ago their relationship had changed. He was pushing her away because that’s what Oliver did when he got scared. This time though, this time was different. This time there had been a note of finality to his tone. What that meant for them she didn’t know, but right now all she could do was deal with Leviathan, or the OO or whatever they called themselves, and figure out what was really going on. Until then the question of whether or not she could ever go home again, much less what her relationship would be with Oliver once she got there, was moot.

She walked up to the reception desk and told them who she was and that she was expected. The receptionist made a phone call and confirmed her appointment then handed her a visitor’s badge.
When she emerged from the elevator Bruce was there to greet her, his dark blue eyes running over her figure and the fake playboy smile firmly in place.

She looked around to make sure they were alone before speaking, “You know, you look creepy when you do that.”

“Do what?” He asked with a frown, the fake smile immediately disappearing.

“The whole ‘fake Bruce Wayne face’,” she told him. “It messes with my digestion so knock it off.” His eyes narrowed and his features darkened with annoyance, “Better.”

He rolled his eyes, “Let’s go, I do have more important things to do than take you tech shopping.”

“Then go do them,” she told him easily. “You’re probably more of a hindrance than a help anyway. I can scrounge for computer parts on my own, you know?”

“Not a chance,” Bruce said dryly. “Giving you free reign in a tech lab is like giving a kid the keys to the candy shop.”

“Yeah, well, it’s for your ‘candy store’ so why you’re complaining I have no idea,” Felicity said smartly.

He led her into a large open lab space on the top floor where a tall thin man was hunched over a table full of components with a pair of microscopic lenses on his face. He looked up, the visor making his eyes almost comically large, “Mr. Wayne! Hello, hello! And who is this?” He asked, removing the headgear.

Bruce pasted on his polite but fake smile again and placed his hand on the center of her back as he led her up to the man in the lab coat. “Felicity Fox, I’d like to introduce Dr. Greg Snyder, head of our experimental division here at WayneTech.”

“Or, as I like to call it, the Booby Hatch,” Dr. Snyder said with a smile as he extended his hand to her. “Ms. Fox,” the doctor said suavely as he took her hand, kissing the back of it in a gallant gesture as he wiggled his eyebrows in a frankly hysterical expression.

Felicity couldn’t help but laugh. Dr. Snyder was a relatively young man, no more than 35 or so with a lantern jaw, permanent grin, and reddish chestnut hair that seemed to curl in every direction. The sparkle in his green eyes paired with his neatly trimmed goatee made him look like a cross between a pirate and a leprechaun. “Call me Felicity,” she told him, immediately falling into instant like with the man.

“And you can call me Greg,” he told her with a flirtatious grin. At Bruce’s dark look Greg reluctantly released her hand and took a step back. “Wait, you’re Lucius’s daughter, right? You wrote that article on AI Decryption Applications that was published a few years back in Scientific American.” His smile, if possible, grew even brighter. “I’m a huge fan!”

Felicity blushed delicately, “Thank you, I appreciate that. It’s actually been a while since anyone mentioned that article. I only published the one.”

“It was revolutionary!” Greg gushed. “Where are you now? Back at MIT teaching? Research?”

Anxiety suddenly stabbed through her, “No, I’m not really doing much of anything at the moment. Just…freelancing, I suppose.” This was what she hated most about her new life as a vigilante sidekick; how to explain to another professional in the hard sciences that you deliberately tanked a promising career to become a secretary.
Instead of looking chagrined or judgmental, Greg immediately turned an eager eye toward Bruce, “Perhaps Mr. Wayne could find a place for you here then? We could use a programmer of your amazing intellect and skills in the experimental division.”

Bruce looked down at her with a curious lift of his eyebrow, “I’ve suggested that several times but she keeps turning me down. Perhaps you’ll have better luck convincing her than I have.”

“Dr. Fox—Felicity, perhaps if I showed you some of what we’re working on you might be kind enough to offer some input,” Greg said excitedly as he gave her a quick tour of the lab.

As Dr. Snyder showed her around his lab she marveled at his inventiveness and sheer genius that fell somewhere between revolutionary upstart and mad scientist. As he gave her a tour of the place she discovered that only about 5% of the tech and software applications his division developed were ever put in production but those that were put WayneTech on the map as the premier Tech Industry Giant. As she looked through his previous ‘experiments’ she couldn’t help but shooting a look towards Bruce. Whether the man realized it or not he was Batman’s personal pet scientist. She recognized many of the Bat’s gizmos as belonging to Greg Snyder and, of course, her father. One in particular caught her eye and she couldn’t help but point it out, “This looks rather familiar.” She pointed to the image of a more angular and camouflaged tumbler on the computer screen.

“Yes, well, um…” Greg glanced over at Bruce nervously before continuing. “That project was scrapped several years ago. The military felt it wasn’t very cost effective.”

“Hmm,” Felicity said non-committedly. If she was reading his body language correctly then Greg Snyder either strongly suspected Bruce of being the Bat or thought he was funding him. In any case, he wasn’t saying anything which gave her the impression that he was either very loyal or he just liked the idea of his inventions being used by someone who was, in turn, protecting the city.

They spent an hour looking around and touring the facility during which Felicity gave Greg a ‘shopping list’ of components she needed and that Bruce would have delivered to his private ‘lab space’.

As they were about to leave, Greg took her hand in his and told her, “I sincerely hope you take Mr. Wayne up on his offer, Felicity. Not only would you be given the chance to work on whatever you like here but you’d also have me as a lab partner,” he said, giving her another beaming grin. “Now how can you possibly turn all that down?”

She chuckled, “As tempting as that is Greg, I’m afraid I already have another offer I’m considering right now, but thanks.”

“What?” Bruce said, looking at her and scowling darkly.

Shit, Felicity thought silently as she caught the look on his face. Great, there goes my blabber mouth again.

“Greg, if you’ll excuse us Felicity and I have a meeting we’re running late for,” Bruce said smoothly as he took her by the arm and led her out of the lab doors toward the elevator.

“Bye,” Felicity said, turning back towards the other man as Bruce practically dragged her away. “That was kind of rude,” she told him as he pulled her onto the elevator and pressed the button to the executive floor.

“He’ll get over it,” he said darkly. “What did you mean by that remark back there?”

“What remark?” She asked innocently. He gave her his best ‘I am not amused’ look and she sighed,
“I got a pretty tempting offer today that I’m seriously considering.”

As the doors opened he took her by the elbow again and led her towards his office.

“I can walk without being dragged around by my arm, you know,” she said quietly, pulling her elbow from his grip.

He stopped and smiled for the group of people who were passing them before leaning in and speaking into her ear, “In my office; now.”

“Fine,” Felicity grumbled as she followed him but still kept a slight distance so he couldn’t latch back onto her elbow.

Because Bruce rarely used his office he didn’t have a permanent secretary on staff. Ms. Wells, his Vice President of Finance and his most trusted employee at WE besides Lucius, usually had one of her EA’s handle most of his workload at Wayne Enterprises unless she needed her elsewhere. He quickly swiped the door with his ID badge and led her past the reception area into his darkened office. As soon as they entered the lights came up illuminating the space.

She looked around the large space and the sweeping views of the Gotham skyline admiringly. WayneTech was one of the tallest buildings in Gotham, dwarfed only by Wayne Towers and, of course, The Wayne Foundation Building so the view was, simply stated, breathtaking. “You know, it’s a shame you don’t use this office more often. It’s a waste of a perfectly good view.”

“Cut the crap, Felicity,” Bruce told her walking around and forcing her to meet him face to face. “Did you really get another job offer today?”

“I told you I was going for interviews,” she reminded him.

“I didn’t think you were serious about that,” he practically growled.

“Why would I make that up?” She asked incredulously.

“What’s the offer and who’s it from; which company?” He demanded. “And don’t say LexCorp because there is no way in hell you’re taking a job there.”

“Excuse me?” Felicity said, taken aback. “Who the hell are you to tell me who I can and can’t work for?”

“So it is LexCorp?” Bruce asked, looming above her. “And just how do you think it will look to have the daughter of Wayne Enterprise’s CEO working for their biggest competitor?”

“First off, it isn’t LexCorp,” she told him, taking off her coat and draping it over one of the chairs in front of the large desk as it was a bit warm and her anger wasn’t helping matters any. “Secondly, if my dad has a problem with my working for another company he should be the one to tell me, not you. And third, even if it were LexCorp it wouldn’t be any of your damn business.”

“And how do you figure that?” Bruce asked, intruding on her personal space.

“Because, last I looked, I didn’t have your name stamped on my ass,” she told him bluntly.

“How much?” Bruce asked her, his lips tightened in a grim line.

Felicity blinked, “Excuse me?”

“How much are they offering?” He demanded.
Her first instinct was to tell him to fuck off but then she thought ‘what the hell?’ ”Seven figures plus perks, stock options, and a voting seat on the board.”

He looked at her in irritation, “Seriously, how much?”

She smiled slowly, “I am being serious.”

His eyes narrowed on her and he shook his head in disbelief, “Bullshit.”

“Not bullshit,” she told him as she leaned her hip against his desk and crossed her arms in front of her chest. “And the first digit on that salary isn’t a one either. We’re talking high seven figures.”

“And let me guess, Ed McMahon is planning on delivering you your first paycheck personally?” Bruce said sarcastically.

“Ed McMahon has been dead a while now, Bruce,” she pointed out. “You’re kind of dating yourself with those antique pop culture references.”

“And your last job was working as Oliver Queen’s executive assistant,” he pointed out in the same tone. “What exactly do they want you to do that would warrant that kind of money?”

“They want me to be the director; run the entire facility,” she told him.

“Based on what qualifications?”

“I don’t know, Bruce; maybe they just liked my outfit,” she said, starting to get pissed.

His eyes ran down her trim figure in the body hugging dress and tailored jacket. “It’s a nice dress but it’s not worth seven figures,” he said dismissively.

“I was one of the youngest doctoral candidates in MIT history,” she pointed out. “Also, if you’ll recall, both you and Oliver seem to think my skillset is pretty invaluable yourselves.”

“MIT was almost six years ago and the only ‘skillsets’ you have on paper is a stint as an IT manager at QC and a couple of years as someone’s gatekeeper; who exactly is offering you that kind of money and why?”

“I’m not having this discussion with you,” Felicity said, completely fed up at that point. “Look, chances are I’m taking the job so I’ll happily stay long enough to upgrade Watchtower for you but that’s it. You can call the decorator and let them know I won’t be taking the penthouse after all.” She reached for her coat but before her fingers touched the cloth he reached out and spun her around, pulling her into his chest as he gripped her elbows tightly.

“No,” he said looking down on her. “We had a deal.”

“We did,” she agreed, not flinching from his hard gaze. “And I told you up front that I was looking at different job offers and that if I took one that I wouldn’t be able to help you.”

“What company?” Bruce demanded. “Because Wayne and LexCorp are the only major players in town and no one else has the kind of deep pockets you’re describing. We bought up Holt and Kord years ago and if you’re lying and Luthor is the one offering you that deal then I guarantee you he’s not interested in your doctorate from MIT.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Felicity asked, trying to pull away from his grip and failing.

He stepped closer until she was pressed against the desk, the entire concept of personal space
completely forsaken, “Meaning that someone is using you to get to me.”

She chuckled humorlessly, “God, do you ever listen to yourself? Believe it or not some people actually see me as more than just Lucius’s daughter or your occasional booty call.” She shot him a ‘go to hell’ look and tried to pull away again, “Let me go.”

“No,” he growled his gaze dark and heated.

“Goddamn it, Bruce!” She snapped and the next thing she knew his mouth was on hers in a punishing kiss that had her toes curling and her brain going offline for the duration.
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Bruce’s arms wrapped around her tightly as his lips slanted over hers. She whimpered under his passionate assault as his tongue traced the seam of her lips and she opened to him involuntarily. He plunged inside, tasting and caressing her, his hands slipping down to her thighs. He lifted her effortlessly and placed her on his desk as he moved between her legs, his hands pushing her hemline up so that they were no longer constrained by the tight material.

His mouth left hers and found her earlobe, biting and teasing the flesh with his tongue and causing her to shudder and moan before she could stop herself.

Damn it, whispered the last bit of sanity left in her quickly melting brain, I should have worn ear muffs or some kind of protective head gear.

As his lips moved down to kiss and taste the curve of her neck his fingers quickly undid the buttons on her jacket and slipped it off her shoulders before undoing his own and allowing it to fall on the floor. He nipped at the hollow of her throat and all conscious thought left her as their mouths met again in a heated kiss.

Her fingers began to tug and pull at his tie and undo the buttons of his shirt until they met the bare skin of his chest. He, in turn, eased the zipper down her back and was pulling away so he could slip it off her shoulders. As soon as her bra was exposed to his gaze he crouched down to cup one satin encased breast with his hand while his teeth began to nibble and tease the other through the material. Her head fell back and she carded his thick inky black hair through her fingers as she felt the heat of her want flow and pulse through her center. His mouth left her chest and traveled upwards, his tongue and lips stroking the flesh of her throat before capturing her mouth in another kiss.

Part of her brain acknowledged the fact that his hands had left her to undo the clasp of his belt and trousers then reach behind her to unsnap her bra, allowing it to join the other clothes on the floor. He removed her glasses, dropping them with a clatter onto his desk. That woke her up.

“Wait,” she said breathlessly. “We shouldn’t—“

He kissed her again, cutting off her protests. He placed her arms around his neck, lifting her slightly as he reached under her dress and grasped the tops of her pantyhose and underwear, pulling them down her legs. “We should,” he said, placing her back on the desk then removing them and her shoes quickly. “And we will.” He tugged his shirt completely off and pulled down his underwear and trousers before tugging her toward him, capturing her lips again, and entered her in one smooth move.

She cried out at the unexpected invasion. His mouth caught her moans and whimpers as his tongue swept across hers and he pulled her to the very edge of the desk as he pushed inside in a rhythm as ancient as time itself. Her legs locked around his hips as his hand palmed her breast and his thumb teased at her nipple. As good as it was, there was something missing. She whimpered in need against his mouth as she sought more friction but their angle was off. She moved to reach between them, seeking to give herself the relief she needed, but he caught her hand as it left his neck. “Bruce, please,” she pleaded against his mouth.

Bruce pulled away from the kiss, his eyes sweeping over her before looking around the room. His eyes lit up then and he pulled away from her, silencing her protests with a quick kiss before kicking away his pants then pulling her dress over her head, leaving her completely exposed, and then lifted her off the desk. Her arms and legs wrapped around him as he walked them over to the banks of floor to ceiling windows with the view that she had been admiring just a few moments before. Felicity gasped in shock as he pressed her back against the icy cold glass and entered her again,
thrusting deep inside, his mouth sucking and biting at her throat as her head fell against the window.

There was something so incredibly erotic about being pressed against the cold, cold glass that added to everything she was feeling. Her head swam and she felt powerful yet so out of control, she wanted to scream and say filthy things that she would never say in a million years because she didn’t feel like Felicity at that moment. She was someone else, someone amazing, and he was thrusting inside of her as she clawed at his back, her teeth scraping against his shoulder like an animal. It had never felt like this between them before and, as though he could hear her thoughts, he groaned then thrust deeper, harder. He took her mouth again and whispered against her lips, “Mine, Baby, you’re mine. You’ll always be mine…”

Every other time he’d taken her they’d been so hidden, so removed from the real world, but this was different. This was primal, forbidden, and raw; he wasn’t making love to her, he was claiming her.

The sensations flowed over her and through her at the same time; the icy cold of the window and the heat of his body all around her, the power of his muscles bunching under her fingers as he held her, and the feeling of being so exposed as he slipped in and out of her, their bodies making wet slapping noises that were almost obscenely loud in the silence of the office.

This was her doing this, she thought as she arched her back away from him so he could capture her nipple with his mouth. She was powerful; a goddess made flesh. He was making love to her and she was making him moan and whisper words of erotic symmetry as he worked his way deeper and deeper inside of her. She tightened her legs around his hips and ground her sex into him as he made a low animalistic sound and bit her nipple a little too hard, the slight pain causing her to gasp only to then moan in pleasure as he soothed her with his tongue.

Logically, in the tiny part of her brain not completely occupied with what was happening to her, she knew that the glass was mirrored and no one could actually see anything. At best, all anyone would be able to see was their faint outline and probably not even that at their height but she could see the entire city of Gotham as he pounded inside of her. An exhibitionist thrill ran through her causing her channel to clench around him. He hit something inside of her, some secret place deep within that sent pleasure zinging through her spine. Her juices began to flow and she felt her thighs go wet as she dripped around him but she felt no shame or embarrassment, only the overwhelming need to have more of him.

“God, I can feel you…” he groaned then scraped his teeth against her neck. “You’re so wet for me, Baby…”

Her mouth opened and formed the words, “More, more, more, more…”

He groaned again, as her fingers dug even deeper into his back. He growled a filthy curse of erotic intent which she began to repeat over and over like a mantra; words that had never come out of her before.

She couldn’t even tell what she was saying, her own words streaming out of her as though she were speaking in tongues but obviously he was paying attention as her erotic babble seemed to spur him on, causing him to let loose with a primal sound and pound even harder against her.

Outside the doors to his office and across the open expanse into the other buildings around them men and women went along with their workday, below them cars clogged the streets and pedestrians hurried along the crowded sidewalks, the images distorting as the steam rose from their warm flesh heating up the glass. It was like they were all watching her, watching them, and she cried out, sobbing in ecstasy as his teeth found her neck again and bit down.
He shifted his angle slightly and she felt a spike of pleasure as he pounded into her g-spot. She moaned and shivered; he shut his eyes tight then took her mouth in another kiss that she could feel down to her bones. He broke away from the kiss and buried his head in her neck, hitching her higher up as he uttered another muffled, “Fuck!”

Something about him saying that word in that tone of voice just did it for her. With a loud cry she came, her entire body tight and quivering as he drove into her like a man possessed. Within seconds of her climax he came with a roar as though her orgasm was the trigger he had been waiting for. She clutched her arms against him tight as he leaned into her, both his hands slapping flat against the glass, his body shuddering into her own.

He dropped his mouth to her shoulder in an open-mouthed kiss as he carried her over to the long leather couch on the other end of the room and laid her down. He knelt beside her on the couch, his eyes seeking hers as he reached out to stroke her cheek softly, his expression shifting from darkness to light. He kissed her again then got up to pad nakedly into his private washroom. As she watched him walk away, admiring the play of muscles across his broad shoulders that were marked by the fine pink lines of shallow scratches she had left behind (not to mention his frankly magnificent ass), she had to stop herself from laughing out loud at the sight of his black sock covered feet. Bruce Wayne might be able to strip a woman faster and with more skill than any other man she’d ever heard of but even he couldn’t do it all.

She heard the sound of water and a few seconds later Bruce emerged with a towel and a damp washcloth in hand. He knelt down beside her and quickly cleaned her thighs and genitals gently and with no hint of embarrassment. He then handed her the towel and she sat up, wrapping it around her nakedness, the room she had once thought of as warm now much chillier given her lack of clothing.

He sat beside her and pulled her into his arms, his hands rubbing warmth into her chilled flesh, “What are we doing?” He said out loud, his chin propped on top of her head as she buried her face in his chest soaking up his heat. Whether he was asking her or himself she didn’t know.

She shut her eyes, preparing for what was coming next. She didn’t bother with the usual self-reprisals or panicky revelations. They had sex, it felt good, she was a willing participant, and she was so over post-coital drama it wasn’t even funny.

She waited for the next volley of words to come but they never did. He stayed silent, his fingers trailing up and down her spine as he breathed her in deeply, his eyes closed and his heart beat slowing. She could hear the whooshing sound of his blood pumping inside of his chest and closed her eyes even tighter so she could keep this moment forever. It would be her new memory and it would have to sustain her for a long time to come.

Her fingers pressed against the hard flesh of his chest, the delicate pads tracing the faint outlines of scars from countless battles fought and won trailing lightly across a flat brown nipple that was hard from cold and across his flat, muscled abdomen to rest upon his thigh. She tilted her head slightly, her lips just touching the hollow of his throat as she breathed in his smell. It was heady and deep, spice and clean sweat. There was the acrid scent of sex in the air and it warred with the other smells within the room; leather, furniture oil, and just a hint of dust and damp as the rugs were probably in need of a cleaning.

As much as she wanted to stay within his arms and pretend, just for a moment, that she would be safe there, that this moment was real and could last, she also knew all good things must end. She allowed herself a few more seconds of his warmth in the silent stillness then got up without speaking and walked into the washroom, immediately hanging the towel on the hook and stepping inside his shower. She let the warm water pound against her chest as she reached behind her and twisted her
hair up, relocating a bobby pin to try to keep her hair as dry as possible. Bruce climbed into the
shower behind her, washcloth in hand as he reached for the soap and turned her toward him. Her
eyes met his. His expression was intense, focused entirely upon her, and she felt almost mesmerized
by those dark blue orbs.

He began to bathe her, his eyes tracing the path of the soapy cloth down her throat, across her
breasts, then between her legs. As he cleaned her gently his lips found hers, kissing her deeply, the
heat of his mouth rivaling the steam of the shower. The washcloth fell to the floor and then it was just
his fingers touching and stroking the folds of her sex. She gasped against him as two of his fingers
entered her in a ‘come hither’ motion that had her squirming and moaning within seconds. She felt
his cock begin to stir again as he pressed against her.

He pushed her backwards gently until her back was against the marble wall of the shower then
dropped to his knees, pulling her hips toward him as he kissed her pubic mound. His tongue eased
between her folds, causing her to gasp and clutch at his shoulders for balance. He used his hands to
urge her to open her thighs and widen her stance and then inserted his fingers inside of her again as
he licked and sucked at her clit.

It was almost too much. The heat of the shower became almost stifling as she fought to get air in her
lungs. As good as it felt she couldn’t take any more and she pulled at him, urging him back to his feet
before claiming his mouth with her own. She could taste her faint musk on his lips, smell the clean
spicy scent of the soap he had used on both of them, and dropped her hand to stroke the hard flesh
poking into her abdomen.

He turned her around, her back to him. He ran his large hand down her back and she arched into his
touch as he stroked up and down, his thumbs massaging and caressing her skin, before placing her
hands on the wall of the shower until she was leaning against it. He pulled the tie and pins from her
hair and ran his fingers through the tangled and curled mass, the water pounding over both of them.
He turned another tap and the water began to flow from multiple shower heads, the steam of the
blessedly hot water rising between them. He reached for the soap and rubbed his long, thick fingers
over it, creating a thick rich foam. He ran his soapy hands over the back of her neck causing her to
shiver then across her shoulder blades and down her spine. She felt as his hands encircled her waist
and he pulled her bottom against his groin. He was hard, so hard, and she leaned into him in
anticipation.

They didn’t say anything, they didn’t have to. There wasn’t much left to say. He adjusted himself
against her, then entered her once more. The sting of his penetration was sharp as her sex was still
swollen from his earlier intrusion but it was a good pain. She rose up on her tiptoes to improve the
angle as he moved inside of her even deeper than before. It was good, almost better than it had been
against the glass. She opened her mouth and began to pant, the water running over her lips and face
as his large hands pulled her hair slightly, the sensation adding to the exquisite agony between her
thighs. She heard his own low moan as he was squeezed by her tight passage and rocked his hips
against her harder.

His fingers dug into her hip and her toes ached but it felt so good. His hand left her hair to run down
her back, tracing her spine, before sliding over her waist then up to capture her breast. He pulled and
pinched her nipple until her knees began to shake then he abandoned her breast to slide down her
stomach until his fingers slipped between her legs. She felt him stroke her to the same rhythm of their
lovemaking and she came loudly, unable to stop herself or muffle the sound. As she came both of his
hands encircled her waist and he pulled her into him with a hard jerk, the rough motion causing her
breath to stutter as he thrust inside of her even harder. By the time he came she was well on her way
to another orgasm, their cries mingling in the small space like a cacophony of ecstasy.
She straightened, leaning hard against his heaving chest as he slipped out of her, feeling both tired and strangely energized by the whole experience. Her lips curled into a satisfied smile as she felt his heart beat out a manic tattoo against her back. He turned her toward him and kissed her deeply, her arms wrapping around his neck as her fingers ran through his slick wet hair.

Without speaking he pulled away and turned her into the spray as he reached for the shampoo on the shelf, his fingers sliding in and out of her hair gently as she allowed him to administer to her. It felt so good, almost better than the sex. His fingers scraped and pulled at her scalp gently before rinsing out her hair and combing through the tangles.

“I always loved your hair,” he said in a near whisper as he pulled her back against his chest. He dropped a kiss on her shoulder before reaching down for the washcloth at their feet.

He handed her the washcloth and she bathed his fluids from her body as he soaped and scrubbed himself before they exited the shower together. He handed her the large fluffy white towel she had hung on the hook earlier before wrapping one around his own hips. She tucked it around her body and glanced at her reflection in the mirror with an inward groan.

The herbs had done their job and the bruises she’d received in Starling were all but gone. The only one left was a faint shadow on her collarbone that would probably be completely gone within another day or two. Even so, with her makeup washed away, the flesh of her throat pink and slightly irritated from the bites and sucking kisses of their making, and her hair a tangled wet mess against her shoulders, she looked less like the confident professional that had left her dad’s apartment that morning and more like a drowned cat.

She left the bathroom to retrieve her purse and returned with it, placing it on the counter top as she pulled out what few cosmetics she had taken with her that morning. She snatched another towel off the shelf and scrubbed her hair vigorously before glancing at Bruce’s reflection in the mirror. “You wouldn’t happen to have a hair dryer, would you?”

He nodded and reached into the drawer under the sink for the small compact hair dryer. “Here,” he said handing it to her, watching as she plugged it in and ran her fingers through her loose curls as she moved the hair drier over her scalp.

After running a comb through his own hair he went back into the office to retrieve their clothes, returning fully dressed with only his tie hanging loose around his neck and his jacket still in the other room as he placed her clothing on the counter next to her. He stood in silent vigil as she brushed her hair into a gleaming golden cloud then applied her mascara and lipstick. As she reached for her underwear he stopped her by tracing a faint scar on her shoulder. “What’s this?”

The herbs she had taken after her run-in with the Clock King had healed the wound so well that the scar was barely visible to most people but, then again, Bruce wasn’t ‘most people’. She was only surprised that he hadn’t noticed it before now.

She stopped, watching his reflection carefully in the mirror, “What does it look like?”

“It looks like a scar; one I don’t remember ever seeing before,” he said gazing intently at it then focused his eyes on the entry wound reflected in the mirror. “Small caliber bullet wound; through and through.” It wasn’t a question. “When did you get shot?”

“A while back,” she said evasively as she pulled on her panties then tugged off the towel so she could put on her bra.

His face darkened in anger and his jaw clenched, “And how long ago is ‘a while back’? Six months
ago?"

Her heart stopped beating for a second but she tried to play it off, “No, it was over a year ago, almost
two,” she said off-handedly as she walked over to the toilet and put down the lid so she could pull on
her stockings while putting some distance between them. “What made you think it happened six
months ago?”

He followed her, watching her with his hawk-like gaze. “Something Queen said. What did happen to
you six months ago?”

She shrugged and looked up at him, schooling her features into an expression of blithe sincerity,
“Nothing much. We caught a hard case and the team took a few lumps but I stayed out of the line of
fire. Why? What did Oliver say exactly?”

He ignored her question, “Lucius never mentioned that you were in the hospital recovering from a
bullet to the shoulder and if he knew you had been hurt he would have told me. He would have
rushed down there the first chance he got, in fact.”

“He didn’t know about it because I didn’t tell anyone and I didn’t go to the hospital,” she said
standing up and tugging the pantyhose the rest of the way up. There really was no elegant way to put
pantyhose on, she thought disgustedly.

“What the hell do you mean you didn’t go to the hospital?” He asked angrily, trailing her as she
pulled her dress over her head and pulled her hair out of the neckline.

“Like you go to the hospital every time you get shot?” She snorted, turning her back to him. “Zip me
up.”

As if he was working on autopilot he did as she asked even though he was still in full rant mode.
“There’s a difference Felicity and you know it!” He told her before spinning her around to face him.
“Who shot you? Give me their name!”

She scowled at him and shrugged off his grip before answering, “William Tockman; he called
himself the Clock King. He was a master hacker we—meaning I—went up against and put away
twice.” She leaned against the counter and tilted her head up at his scowling face, “If you insist on
going all revenge-y over it though, I should warn you that he has a bad habit of escaping from
prison. He disappeared from lock up several months ago and if I can’t find him then I know you
can’t either.”

“We’ll see,” he said grimly in a way that translated to the fact that, yes, he would be going all
revenge-y and the Clock King would not be getting out of prison a third time. “So not only did he
fail to see to it that this ‘Tockman’ was kept in a secure facility, but Queen also let you get shot?”

“He didn’t let me do anything,” she told him. “Also, for the record, Tockman wasn’t aiming for me; I
got in the way of the bullet when he was trying to shoot someone else.”

Bruce’s expression twisted into a furious look of rage, “You took a bullet for Queen?”

“Not for Oliver, for someone else,” she sighed, walking around him into the office.

“Why didn’t he take you to the hospital afterwards?” He demanded as he continued to chase after
her.

“He offered and I refused.”
“Why the hell would you do that?” He demanded angrily. “Do you know how dangerous a bullet to
the shoulder can be? This isn’t the goddamn movies, Felicity! People don’t just jump up after getting
a bullet to the fucking shoulder!”

“Well, I did,” she told him with an edge of irritation. “It was no big deal and I had not one, but two,
field medics who saw to my injuries right then and there.”

“No big deal? No big deal?! Why would you do something that stupid?” He demanded. “Any bullet,
even a .22, can kill you, Felicity! Shoulder wounds kill people every day! You have the brachial
artery, the subclavian artery, not to mention blood clots, infection--!”

“Look, if you want the full ballistics report it was a .22 caliber bullet with a Teflon jacket fired at
midrange and the wound was a through and through. It didn’t hit any bones or arteries and, as you
could see, it was high up in the shoulder just short of being a graze. The bullet didn’t even deform on
impact because I was standing in the sweet spot and had on a heavy leather jacket when it hit so the
bullet was significantly slowed with a very small exit wound. There was little tissue damage and no
burns. A friend of mine stitched me up right there in the Lair.” She sighed and looked up at him,
“They gave me some oxy and some herbs, I took the weekend to rest up with a pint of ice cream and
a heating pad, and I was back at my desk on Monday,” she shrugged on her jacket before reaching
for her coat and pulling that on as well. She picked up her glasses and examined them carefully
before putting them on. Swear to God, if he broke her glasses she would have been pissed. She’d
already broken her back ups and getting a last minute emergency appointment to the ophthalmologist
was a pain in the ass. The last time she broke her glasses she’d had to hack their computer system to
avoid a three week long wait.

“I just…” he tightened his jaw in anger. “There are no words to describe just how completely pissed
off I am right now.”

“Get over it, Bruce; it was almost two years ago!” She buttoned her coat and tied her scarf around
her neck, “And for your information, I happen to be pretty proud of that scar. I got it saving my
friend’s life, not to mention the fact that I not only stopped the bad guy but I prevented him from
causing a gas explosion that would have taken out three city blocks and I did it mostly on my own.
Besides, I do a lot of stupid stuff, or have you already forgotten about the sex we just had all over
your office?”

“I haven’t forgotten. Believe me, every second of it is burned in my brain,” he told her as he looked
her in the eye. “It’s just one of many reasons I’m--,” His mouth tightened into a grimace as his hands
encircled her waist, “Where is this going, Felicity? And what’s going on with you? You’re not
thinking clearly, you’re being evasive; and now I find out that while you were in Starling, Queen
allowed you to nearly get yourself killed and you act as though it’s no big deal! You got shot!
Someone shot you and you didn’t even call your family to let them know? Had I heard that you were
hurt…” He shut his eyes, his jaw clenching as he gnashed his teeth together. “Not only that, but
Queen didn’t even care enough about you to see that you got medical attention.”

She started to object but he pinned her with a steely gaze and shook his head, “Back alley stitches in
a basement chased by a couple of Oxycodeone and some homeopathic bullshit is not medical
attention!” He dropped his hands from her waist and plunged his fingers through the still slightly
damp hair that fell over his forehead as he ran his other hand over his mouth turning away from her
for a moment before suddenly swinging back around, his anger building by the second. “You need
to wake up and start paying attention! I don’t know what the hell Queen was thinking or how the he
runs his team but, believe you me, the next time I see him I’m going to ram my fist down his
goddamn throat!” By now a vein was throbbing in his temple, his face dark mask of rage, “This life
isn’t a game; I don’t do what I do because it’s fun and you…I’m worried about you and…Damn it
Felicity, you aren’t acting like the person I know; the smart, sensible, intelligent woman who thinks things through! You’re keeping secrets from me and I don’t like it—you and Queen both! Something is going on with you and you need to tell me what it is right fucking now!” He slammed his palm down on the desk, the loud slap echoing throughout the room. He turned his back to her and began to pace back and forth like a caged animal, his agitation palatable. “Goddamn it!”

“Calm down!” She snapped, getting sick of his crap. “First off, I am an adult and I make my own choices! You have absolutely no right to lecture me about anything, Mr. I Wear a Fucking Costume with a Cape and Pointy Ears and Regularly Get Shot at by Machine Guns! I don’t get all pissed off about Alfred stitching you up in a cave full of flying rodents, rats, and bat guano so don’t you criticize my nice clean basement! Second, you need to check your attitude because I am not your child or your property, Bruce! You don’t get to ground me or dictate what I do or when I do it! Our relationship begins and ends when one of us comes and don’t even try to pretend it’s more than that!”

“That’s a load of bullshit and you know it!” Bruce roared at her. “I happen to care about you, damn it, and apparently I’m the only person that does! If this is the way you’ve been living your life the last couple of years then maybe I should start treating you like a child because you’re behaving like one; like some stupid kid who doesn’t realize that she isn’t immortal! I have no intentions of calming down as long as you keep putting yourself in these kinds of situations! You’re hiding things from me, things I need to know!” He stepped forward, pointing an accusing finger at her, “You’re the only one who needs to get their head in the game here! I’m the only person in this room who’s making sense!”

“Excuse me?” Felicity said taken aback. “Let me get this straight; you jump me in your office twice and I’m the one who needs to check their mental status?” She jabbed her finger into his chest, “You’re the one who goes from screaming at the top of his lungs to screwing someone against the wall at the turn of a dime then back again so check yourself, Mr. Wayne!”

She spun around and headed toward the door as he called after her, tying his tie quickly as he grabbed his own coat and jacket and tucked them into the crook of his arm, “Felicity! Goddamn it! Slow down! Where the hell are you going?” He demanded, chasing after her at a jog. “We’re not done!”

She headed to the elevator, hitching her purse higher on her shoulder as she hit the down button, “First off I’m going to get something to eat because I’m starving and I skipped lunch because of you.” The doors opened and she got in the elevator. She pressed the floor button and Bruce hurried inside before the doors shut, quickly buttoning his collar and straightening his tie before pulling on his jacket then his coat. “After that I’m going to call Dr. Schwartz for an appointment and, if he can’t see me today, I’m going to the pharmacy and then home.”

“How do you need to go to the doctor?” He asked sharply.

“None of your business,” she grumbled. I ought to make him cough up the $49.99 plus tax, she thought, but shades of cab fares and night stands stopped her. Goddamn it, I’m going to have to start keeping condoms in my purse if I’m going to keep slutting it up all over town like this.

Why was it that in romance novels, no matter where the protagonists find themselves when the flush of lust hits them, there’s always a handy stash of condoms just waiting at their fingertips? Caught up in playing patty cake on the kitchen counter? No problem; we keep rubbers next to the garbage ties in the junk drawer. Getting lucky in the Outback? No worries mate, check under the rock next to the wallaby.

Apparently in soft-core paperback porn the Trojan Man is some kind of perverted omnipresent Easter
Bunny leaving little latex presents in every nook and cranny.

Felicity paused and mentally added, ‘so to speak,’ at the end of that sentence.

Damn, even in her own head she made inappropriate Freudian slips. Of course, she was thinking about sex, so…

“Are you hurt? Did I hurt you?” He asked with a frown, reaching for her waist and turning her toward him so he could sweep his eyes over her from top to bottom as though he had some kind of x-ray vision.

X-ray vision, Felicity thought to herself. That would be a really stupid superpower. You’d constantly be walking into walls you couldn’t see or, worse, you’d have to see everybody naked all the time. Let’s face it; the world was not exactly chock full of supermodels.

Again; totally inappropriate thought.

She slapped his hands away, “I’m fine,” she told him, straightening her scarf. “It’s…something else —something that, again, is none of your business!”

“Fine, we’ll grab a late lunch and then I’ll drive you to the doctor myself,” Bruce told her.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Felicity snorted derisively.

“Yes, you are,” he shot back.

“Why should I go to lunch with you?” She asked him.

“Because the last time we had sex you said I treated you like a cheap date!” He told her. “Well, I’m getting pretty damn sick of that shit so this time I refuse to give you the satisfaction.” He looked down at her, a determined set to his mouth, “If you want lunch then I will buy you lunch, understood? And we’re not taking separate vehicles either; you’re staying with me until the end of this ‘date’.”

“‘Date’?” She repeated derisively, “I think it’s more like closing the barn door after the cow gets out than a date.” Her voice was laced with sarcasm. “Dating is supposed to come before sex, not almost four years and more than a dozen times after the fact.”

He glowered at her, “I’m taking you to lunch so you can just deal with it and call it whatever the hell you want to.”

“Fine,” Felicity grumbled.

“Good!” He shot back in the same tone.

“Just for the record though, I’m not riding in that stupid car of yours,” she told him as the doors opened to the lobby. “I’ll catch a cab before I subject my ass to those seats again.”

“I took the Jag today already knowing how you feel about the MacLaren,” he told her, a small triumphant smirk playing over his lips as he placed his hand on the small of her back.

“Whatever,” she said, ignoring the heat of his large hand through her clothes.

He walked her to his car and opened the door for her before moving into the driver’s side. As soon as she sat down she pulled out her cell and dialed her family physician to request a walk-in appointment.
“Dr. Schwartz’s office, Caity speaking. How may I help you?”

“Hi Caity, this is Felicity Smoa—er, Fox. I know I haven’t been there in a while but I was wondering if you had time to squeeze me in this afternoon.”

“One moment, Ms. Fox,” Caity said as she paused to look up her records. Suddenly her voice warmed up considerably. “Of course we can fit you in! When can you get here? We close at five o’clock but we can keep the office open if that’s more convenient for you?”

Since Peggy practically had them on speed dial she wasn’t all that surprised by her offer. “What time is it now?” She looked at the display on her phone. “Can you fit me in around four? I was just on my way to get something to eat first.”

“That’s fine. Can I ask why you need to see Dr. Schwartz today so I can make a note of it in your chart?”

Felicity glanced over at Bruce who was listening in shamelessly. She sighed, “I know Dr. Schwartz isn’t an OB/GYN but I was wondering if he could give me a Depo-Provera shot or at least refer me to a doctor who can? I had a pap recently but I just moved back to Gotham and I don’t have my prescription with me plus I haven’t had a chance to look around yet for another doctor.” She noted how Bruce’s hands tightened on the steering wheel and his jaw clenched as if he were biting back some commentary.

“The doctor can do that for you today, no problem. He’ll probably also set you up with one of his partners, Dr. Tambala, here in our building. If you like I can call her office and see if she could see you instead if that would make you more comfortable?”

“Yes, please,” Felicity said gratefully.

“Hold please,” Caity said and bad elevator muzak pumped in over the phone as she placed her on hold.

Felicity put it on speakerphone and laid the phone in her lap as a midi file of ‘Close to You’ by the Carpenters filled the Jag.

“I’m sorry,” Bruce said quietly avoiding her gaze. “I wasn’t thinking and I should have been.”

“It takes two to tango,” she told him, not even bothering to pretend not to know what he was referring to. “Although, seriously, if this is a habit of yours you might want to ask your tailor to put a special condom pocket in those suits or consider seeing your urologist for a consult; I hear vasectomies are an outpatient procedure these days.”

“I’m not getting a—!” He began with a scowl.

“Ms. Fox?”

Felicity turned off the speaker and brought the phone to her ear, “Yes?”

“Dr. Tambala said she’d be happy to see you at four o’clock. We’ll forward your records to her so you won’t have to worry about filling anything out when you get there in order to save time.”

She gave her the name of the doctor she saw in Starling and got off the call before sinking deep into the soft rich caramel leather of the antique 1966 Jaguar E-type convertible. Even though she was not a car person she did have a fondness for this particular one. Bruce had driven it for years and whenever Tim would get his hands on it he’d take her and Tam for a ride through the park with the
top down. It was a deep cherry red that had been lovingly restored and gleamed in the sunlight with its chrome embellishments, sexy curves, and deep set headlights.

“What do you want?” Bruce asked at last.

“Anything’s good for me,” she told him assuming he was referring to food. At least she was going to pretend it was about food for as long as she could. “The burger I had the other day was actually pretty good if you want to go there.”

“I’m not buying you a hamburger; this is a date, remember?” Bruce said with a grin, some animation returning to his expression. “Italian?”

“That’s fine.”

He wound up taking her to Scalini Fedeli and, despite the restaurant being very popular with the financial district’s denizens who frequented the place for power lunches, they were seated right away. For once she wasn’t even tempted to roll her eyes and make a remark about the perks of being Bruce Wayne especially when, after explaining that they were in a bit of a rush, their food came out remarkably quickly.

They ate their lunch in companionable silence, both just concentrating on the food in front of them. She had the roasted beet and fennel salad with goat cheese and apple followed by an entrée of the soft egg yolk and spinach ravioli and a nice glass of Chianti. Meanwhile Bruce, ever the well-disciplined eater and teetotaler, had the bibb lettuce and Sangiovese poached Forelle pear salad with the butternut agnolotti for his entrée. He also turned down the Chianti in favor of a tall glass of unsweetened iced tea. When they were done and the dessert cart came around Bruce refused his dessert and, as tempting as the warm apple tart with brown sugar crumble looked and smelled, she was too stuffed and in too big a rush to make her appointment as it was.

She offered to take a cab to the doctor’s but he insisted on going with her, much to her surprise. He even followed her up and waited in the lobby as she was ushered into a room without waiting and seen immediately by the doctor. After a quick explanation of her unexpected move which led to her forgetting to retrieve her birth control from the medicine cabinet, along with her apparent inability to remember to take the pill in the morning even when she did have it, as well as her scandalous lack of condom use, the doctor gave her the Depo shot. Even though she immediately copped to playing fast and loose with her reproductive fate she gave her a quick safe sex lecture (lovely) and administered a pregnancy test (negative, naturally. It had literally only been a couple of hours since they had sex but the nurse insisted, so she went ahead and peed in the stupid little cup because it’s always fun times at the gyno) then told her to come back if her period was late to be tested again. She was in and out in less than twenty minutes, and reminded herself to thank Peggy Ann for the use of the frequent flyer cache she apparently had with Dr. Schwartz and Associates.

She stopped by the reception desk and noticed a very tense Bruce watching her from where he was seated in the waiting area. As soon as she emerged from the back he got to his feet and began to gather their things.

“I set you up with an appointment in three months, Ms. Fox,” the receptionist told her. “And Caity at Dr. Schwartz’s office said to call her to set up a checkup when you get a chance.”

“Thanks,” Felicity told her, taking the appointment card from her and dropping it in her purse.

“Everything okay?” Bruce asked quietly as she approached, holding her coat out for her.

“Yep,” she said, allowing him to help her put it on before walking out of the office. He followed her
out and into the elevator wordlessly, his countenance once again grim and thoughtful. “What?” She asked at last once they were seated back in his car.

He turned over the motor and the heater came on, quickly cutting through the chill that had settled in the enclosed vehicle. “What did the doctor say about…” his voice trailed off as he looked at her from the corner of his eye.

“About what?” She asked again.

“Well, we didn’t use any protection,” he said so quietly she almost had to strain to hear him. “I mean, I’m clean; I get tested regularly, but um…” He glanced at her furtively.

“So am I,” she told him with raised eyebrows. “I had a blood test before I left Starling and, well, not to set you off again, but I know Oliver tests clean because I make all his appointments and take his messages plus I’m his medical proxy so…”

“Not—” he shook his head, “I’m not worried about that,” he said with a puff of breath. “I meant… other possibilities that can come from what we just did.”

Other possibilities? It was too tempting to resist.

“Oh that,” she said. “Oh, you totally knocked me up. I’m as pregnant as a penguin! Don’t worry about it though, I intend to move to Europe for the next nine months just like Loretta Young did and then ‘adopt’ the baby myself to avoid the scandal of giving birth to your love child.” For a split-second Bruce looked so stricken with panic she had to chuckle, “Relax Bruce, I’m kidding. Chances are you’re in the clear.”

“Chances?” He repeated flatly. “What exactly does that mean?”

She sighed, “Look, we’re good, okay? Seriously though, if you’re going to freak out this bad then I only have two words for you: Outpatient Procedure.”

He, however, wasn’t laughing. “We need to talk about what it is we’re doing here.”

“We’re not doing anything. We had sex, it was a one-time thing, we’re done; end of story.”

“But it’s not a one-time thing and we’re not done.” He turned off the motor and turned to her. “This —” He gestured between them, “Us; it isn’t going away and, frankly, I don’t want it to.”

“Then what do you want, Bruce?” She asked him. “A relationship?”

“Maybe,” he said, glancing away from her with an inscrutable expression.

“It wasn’t that long ago when you were trying to sneak out of my house in the middle of the night and now you want me to make an honest man out of you?” She asked with an edge of incredulity.

“I was…look, there’s no excuse for my behavior but that was then and this is now,” his tone was firm and he got over his sudden bout of shyness enough to look her in the eye as he spoke. “I’m not saying I want anything official, I’m just saying that I’m too damn old to go sneaking around in shadowy corners and pretend like this doesn’t mean anything.”

“You’re not that old,” she told him dryly.

“I’m 41; that’s old enough,” he said.

“Not until February 19th,” she told him without even having to think about it.
His smirked slightly, “You remembered my birthday?”

“Yeah,” she frowned. “So? I’m good at remembering numbers and dates; it’s no big deal.”

“July 24th,” Bruce said, apropos to nothing.

“What about it?” She said despite knowing exactly what the significance of that date was.

Actually, although Bruce didn’t know it, that date had become significant for a lot of reasons.

“It’s your birthday,” he said in the same even tone.

Among other things. “I know that; so?”

“So I guess I must be good at memorizing dates myself,” he told her. “Here’s another one: September 23rd four years ago; remember that one?”

She flushed. Yes, she did in fact remember that date and she would for the rest of her life. “What do you want, Bruce?”

He took a moment and looked at the burled wood of the steering wheel before answering her. “I want…I want us to be together.”


His lips curled in disgust. “God no; I refuse to be referred to as someone’s ‘boyfriend’. That’s absurd. It makes me sound like a spotty faced teenager asking you to the prom.” He turned his dark blue eyes to her again, “Why do we have to label it anyway? Can’t we just agree that this is happening and just go with that?”

“Well, I don’t like being called anyone’s ‘boyfriend’. I’m sorry but I am neither a ‘boy’ nor your ‘friend’. I’m a grown man in an adult sexual relationship with a woman, not a ‘girl’ and I also don’t like being referred to as a ‘partner’, ‘lover’, or any of the other insipid euphemisms people use to indicate a significant other while in public,” he stated emphatically.

She snorted. “Well, sorry Charlie but you’re stuck with ‘boyfriend’ since ‘male sexual affiliate’ is a bit cumbersome to the tongue and ‘fuck muffin’ doesn’t really fly in polite society,” she shot back in the same tone. He gave her a dirty look and she took a centering breath, “Fine, let’s skip the labels, oh ambassador of orgasms.” Another nasty glare followed, “How do you see this non-relationship relationship working? Are you planning on knocking on my dad’s door and taking me home for the occasional sleepover at random intervals or what?”

“I thought you could move in---with me, at the manor,” he answered brusquely. At her look of surprise he quickly spoke, “You said you didn’t want to live at the penthouse and, frankly, I wasn’t too happy with that idea either. The Batcave Watchtower needs upgrading as well and you’d have free reign there. You already mentioned redoing the alternate Watchtower location with a lab and such; I already have all that. You could move in and handle coms at night and when I’m at the office you could work on upgrades. Then, a few months down the line, if you still want to work you could help out at WayneTech or you could pick someplace else to go. Wayne Enterprises is huge; between that and all the different charitable foundations you could do whatever you wanted to.”
Felicity couldn’t decide whether to laugh at him or sock him in the jaw. “Let me get this straight, and stop me if I get something wrong,” she said slowly. “You want a relationship but you don’t want to label it?”

“Yes,” he said firmly.

“And you want me to live in your home as your non-girlfriend, take care of your coms at night, and work for you during the day at one of your companies while all this undefined sex is going on in the background?”

“Yes—no,” he said quickly. “I mean yes but--!” He scowled at her, “You’re making it sound bad and that’s not what I meant at all!”

“Then how did you mean it, Bruce?” She asked calmly. “Will this be a monogamous relationship or will we be free to see other people? Or will you be free to date while I stay at home? Will I get a paycheck for working at Wayne Enterprises or will I just be paying for my room and board with sex and unpaid labor? Do you intend to take our ‘non-relationship relationship’ public or should I hide in the back bedroom whenever people come around? What if we have kids? Is that the reason you’re so attached to keeping your vasa deferentia intact; you want to make babies with me? Because, sorry to tell you Mr. I Don’t Do Commitment, if we keep this up without you either getting snipped or one of us getting better at remembering to use birth control, I’m going to be up the duff in no time. Will I be shuffled off in my ‘confinement’ and raise our children in secret as we take up residence as flowers in your attic? And what happens when you get tired of me, Bruce? Will I get a pension and a pat on the head like some pre-revolutionary French concubine or do you expect me to just slink off into the shadows like some miserable discarded thing who didn’t even rate high enough to be called your ‘girlfriend’?”

“No! I would never--I just meant that…” he stopped and glared. “Damn it, what do you want me to say?”

“I don’t want you to say anything,” she told him. “I don’t need a relationship--or a non-relationship for that matter, I don’t want to be your girlfriend any more than you want to be my boyfriend, and I’m not moving into your house nor do I intend to work for one of your companies. We had sex, it was nice, and I don’t expect you to apologize for it or make a declaration of your intentions afterwards. I’m a big girl and I can take care of myself. Now, if you don’t mind, I have phone calls to make and I’m meeting Barbara and Tim for dinner later so I need to get home and change.”

“You’re mad?” Bruce asked incredulously.

“No,” she told him. “I just need to get home. This wasn’t exactly where I planned to be today.”

“No, you are; you’re mad at me because I’m actually trying to do the stand-up thing and be honest about how I feel,” he said with a slight edge to his voice. “Fine, you want to go home, I’ll take you home.” He turned over the motor and pulled back into traffic.

“Wait,” Felicity said, going from slow simmer to full boil. “Let me clarify something for you real quick; you might want to pretend that you were being my knight in shining armor just now but the truth is that you weren’t trying to do me any favors with that half-assed bullshit offer to shack up, Bruce. The fact that you even thought for a second that I’d go for something like that proves just how little you know me. I don’t need a definition of what we are to one another to make my life complete but I’m also not willing to play house as your all-but-wife; if and when I decide to cohabitate with anyone it won’t be as the live-in entertainment.”

“What do you want then?” He asked angrily, his grip tightening on the steering wheel as he wove
through traffic.

“Nothing,” she said simply. “I don’t want anything from you.”

“Bullshit,” he snorted.

“Why is that bullshit?” She asked him.

“Because you might pretend to be a modern woman but, at heart, you’re still an old fashioned girl, Felicity,” he told her.

Son of a-- “Meaning what exactly?”

He smirked at her with a superior lift of his lips before turning his attention back to the traffic all around them. “Meaning that you might pretend to not want the titles and definitions but we both know, deep down, that’s exactly what you want. You’re the kind of girl who expects to have a ring placed on her finger and I’m the kind of guy who will never give you that, so you need to know exactly what you’re in for as things between us continue to progress. And don’t even bother to deny it or screech about how it will never happen again because we both know it will.” He shot her a heated look. “I’ve been inside of you too often for you to say otherwise and I don’t intend to waste any more of my precious time on this wounded virgin routine you have down pat. Hate to break it to you Baby, but virgins don’t scream ‘fuck me harder’ when they’ve got their legs wrapped around you and their claws in your back.”

‘Pissed’ didn’t even come close to describing what she was feeling at that moment. “You don’t know anything about what I want or how I feel!”

“Don’t I?” He asked with a superior lift of his eyebrow. “I had you first, Baby, and we both know I’ll have you last. You didn’t take any other men into your bed until I left you for the second time and the only reason you went there with Queen was because you were hurt and confused. If I hadn’t walked away you’d already be in my home and in my bed and all of this nonsense about you working for some made up company would be over and done with.”

“God, you are so full of yourself!” She burst out, her patience at an end as she turned in her seat towards him. “Do you even listen to the words that come out of your mouth or are you really so far gone in this little fantasy of yours that you can’t even see how full of shit you are?”

He chuckled as though her outburst was somehow meant to be amusing, “I’m just being honest, Felicity. Sex means something to you; you know it and I know it. You can pretend that today didn’t mean anything or that, deep down inside, you aren’t hoping that I’ll break down and tell you what you want to hear, but the fact that you let me make love to you at all tells me everything I need to know.”

She was so angry, so furious, that words escaped her. Just the gross arrogance of how he was speaking to her---her face turned beet red and she felt angry tears prick her eyes as she fought against the impulse to ram her fist into his big stupid face!

Traffic slowed just then and as soon as Bruce came to a complete stop Felicity immediately jumped out of the car and slammed the door behind her as she hurried over to the sidewalk and away from traffic.

“Goddamn it, Felicity! Get back in the car!” He yelled as he rolled the window down.

She didn’t say a word; instead she let her finger do the talking for her and jogged up the sidewalk until she found a cab that would take her home.
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Seven

“So how’s the love triangle going,” Barbara asked, popping a piece of sushi into her mouth as she grinned at Felicity over the coffee table. “Or is it a square since you had that lunch date with Yummy McDriver the other day?”

“Technically he’s not a driver, he’s a security consultant who is temporarily assigned to my dad’s detail,” Felicity said from the couch as she shoveled some soba noodles into her mouth with a pair of chopsticks.

Barbara turned to Tim, “Notice that she didn’t comment on the rest of what I said; what does that tell you Red Robin?”

“Sounds like she’s deflecting to me, Batgirl,” Tim said as he quickly snatched a piece of Felicity’s Candy roll off her plate before she could stab his hand with her chopsticks.

“I’m not deflecting,” Felicity said with a snort.

“Did Yummy ask you on a second date yet?” She asked.

“Yes, he’s having dinner with my family at the penthouse in a couple of weeks.” She shrugged, "We were going to do it this Friday but something came up and I had to reschedule, so..."

Tim choked slightly on his ramen, “Seriously? This guy wants to have dinner with your family? On your second date?” He asked incredulously, “Does he have a death wish or something?”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” She asked throwing him a dangerous look.

“Have you met your dad?” Tim shot back.

“Oh Timmy-Tim-Tim, he doesn’t hate all the men his daughters date, just you,” Barbara said with a toothy grin. “Right Baby?”

“Pretty much,” Felicity said ruefully.

“Really?” Tim said in a hurt tone. “Just me?”
“Well, no,” Felicity said correcting herself. “I think he actually might have hated that guy Tam met while she was in Europe more. What was his name?” She paused for a moment. “Antonio? No. Alphonso?” She sighed and took a sip from her teacup. “Whatever his name was, every time Tam would call home he’d go to the phone muttering, ‘Please don’t be pregnant, please don’t be pregnant,’ under his breath before he picked up.”

“Wait, she never told me about some Italian guy,” Tim said with a frown.

Barbara snorted, “Like you’ve told her about every girl you’ve ever dated?”

“Yeah, I have actually,” Tim said.

“Really? All of them?”

Tim scowled, “Yeah, all of them. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Ariana?”

“Yeah.”

“Zoanne?”

“Yes.”

“Stephanie?”

Tim snorted, “Of course!”

“Darla?”

“Yeah,” Tim said a little reluctantly then turned to Felicity as she made a face. “What?”

“It’s just…” she wrinkled her nose, “Wasn’t she technically dead; like reanimated corpse dead?”

“No!” Tim said, taking umbrage.

“Moving on from the slut-zombie and Tim’s brush with necrophilia,” Barbara continued ignoring Tim’s angry exclamation of ‘Watch it’, “Kara?”

“She knows about Kara,” Tim grumbled.

“That weird chick; Rose?”

“I never slept with Rose,” Tim said carefully.

“Didn’t you tell me she jumped on top of you naked and basically asked you if she could take you into adulthood?” Barbara asked with a superior lift of an eyebrow.

“Um…” Tim shifted his eyes and bit his lip as he considered his words carefully.

“Yes?” Barbara prompted.

“That’s merely a technicality,” he said, grasping for straws. “I didn’t actually have sex with her.”

“Technicality?” Felicity repeated dubiously.

“Translation: She played intern in the blue dress to his cigar smoking leader of the free world but
didn’t actually take it in the downtown dry cleaners,” Barbara supplied.

“Say what now?” Tim said in confusion.

“She popped your cork and gave you a happy ending without the free eggroll,” Barbara told him.

“What?” Tim asked her with flushed cheeks.

“Come on and keep up, Tim; that one was too easy,” Barbara snorted.


Tim began to sputter in embarrassment, “I—what—you—!”

“And, by the way, despite certain rumors to the contrary, oral does count,” Barbara said matter-of-factly. “If two people are in the same room, in physical contact, and one of them comes because of something the other one is doing to them, that’s sex.”

“What about the dom/sub stuff with the leather and spanking where no one ever gets naked?” Felicity asked curiously.

“Good question!” Barbara praised enthusiastically. “Rose was really into leather too, wasn’t she? So what’s the story, Tim? Did she lube you up with a stick of butter and introduce you to the joys of pony play?”

“I did not have sex with that woman!” Tim insisted.

“And there’s the historically accurate quote I was looking for. I rest my case,” Barbara said offhandedly.

“I hate you both so much right now,” Tim grumbled.

“Is it weird that I feel strangely flattered to be included in that?” Felicity asked, turning to Barbara.

“I always do,” she responded. “What about that Lynx chick?”

“What is it with you Bats and Cats?” Felicity pondered out loud.

“Pussy and alliteration,” Barbara answered in a deadpan.

“Hey!” Tim said, looking offended.

“Am I wrong?” Barbara asked him.

Tim looked at her uncertainly then cleared his throat, “Moving on; the answer is yes, Tam knows about all of the women in my past, happy?”

“Did you sleep with all of them?” Barbara asked.

“Getting a little personal, don’t you think?” Tim asked defensively.

“Like she wasn’t before with the stick of butter thing?” Felicity pointed out.

“And what the hell is ‘pony play’ anyway?” Tim asked as he blushed again.

“Google it and I’ll take that as a no,” she said with a smirk.
“For your information, including Tam, I’ve slept with four girls, okay?” Tim said, digging into his ramen again.

“Well, it’s not like that’s a lot,” Barbara shrugged. “Even at your age four partners altogether isn’t really a big deal.”

“What do you mean?” Tim asked slowly.

“It’s just that the average number of sexual partners for an adult male is between nine and twenty so you’re actually on the low end of the spectrum.”

“Twenty? That many?” Tim asked faintly.

Barbara nodded, popping another piece of sushi in her mouth and chewing. “Yeah, and the average number of men an adult woman sleeps with during her lifetime is between four and fifteen.”

“How do you even know this stuff?” Tim asked with a grimace.

“I’m a woman; this is what women talk about,” she said giving him a look that screamed ‘doh’.

“Well, in that case I’m definitely doomed to lifetime of being below average,” Felicity said with a sigh.

Barbara gave her a sympathetic pout, “What about Yummy? Not feeling it?”

“No, he’s great, but he’s also moving in a few weeks to Central City and…let’s just say that I’m not really ready to be serious about anyone at the moment so it’s doomed from the start,” she said with a wry quirk of her lips. “Still he does give good date, I’ll grant you that.”

“Can we stop referring to this guy as ‘Yummy’ and start calling him ‘Jake’ or ‘Security Boy’ or something?” Tim groused. “It’s bad enough that I always get roped into these ‘Sex and the City’ moments with you guys without having to run into this dude someday and being forced to call him ‘Yummy’ in my head.” He huffed out an exasperated breath, “You guys have a way of really screwing with my manhood.”

“I’m sorry Timmy, I didn’t mean to bring out your inner vajayjay,” Barbara said with false sympathy.

“I really hope Queen got me my own place,” Tim muttered.

“I spoke to that guy Diggle and he said he got us both houses in Felicity’s old neighborhood and that he arranged for them to come fully furnished.” She turned to Felicity, “By the by, John Diggle? Holy hawtness, Baby-girl! What the hell?” She whipped her napkin at her, “Why didn’t you tell me there were two hotties on Team Arrow?”

“Sorry,” Felicity said with a shrug. “I would have mentioned my friend’s hotness quotient had I realized that it was vital to the mission.”

“Oh, it was definitely vital,” Barbara said, fanning herself. “Trust me, I was thinking of writing a thank you letter to the inventors of Skype by the time I logged off. That body and a voice to match—woof!”

Felicity smiled, “Dig’s a sweetie and he’s tough as nails; very on mission but a great guy. He’s an expert in several different forms of martial arts, hand to hand combat, weapons, and firearms, and he acts as the team medic as well as support in the field.”
“Former military, right?” Tim asked and Felicity nodded. “What about Queen?”

Felicity furrowed her brow as she thought of how to answer that one. “He started out as a little punk Richie-rich kid so he plays that up to a certain extent for outsiders but to his friendlies, when he’s hot on mission, he can come across as being downright grim. Not a whole lot of laughs in the Lair so he might get easily irritated by the patter you’ve developed over the years but he’ll loosen up. Not much, but some. He has been known to toss a zinger or two if he’s in the mood. Same with Dig. When he’s out of the hood and he’s playing at normal he does Bruce’s playboy routine but less intense because he’s trying to build his company so he’s walking a finer line with it.”

“What else?” Barbara prompted.

“He has this responsibility complex going on and lots of guilt over his past. Before he wound up on that island he had basically run away from committing to his longtime girlfriend, Laurel, by sneaking off with her sister to China. I don’t have a lot of details but I know he thought Sara had died before she resurfaced in Starling.” She grimaced, “There’s still a lot of messed up guilt going on there. Sara Lance, his ex-girlfriend’s sister, is a mask working under the code name ‘Black Canary’. She used to be a League assassin and she sometimes acts as a member of the team but…” She paused, “Look, I like Sara, last week I would have said I trusted her implicitly, but you should still tread carefully because of the possible Stellmoor connection until I can get together with her and find out for myself what the hell’s going on. I need to set up a meet with her after I leave here and I’ll call and let you guys know what happened.”

“Can’t you just call her?” Tim asked.

“Finally, one Bat that knows how to use a phone,” Barbara snorted. “He’s got a point; why not just call her?”

“She’s a trained operator and I need more than just her voice to go on to get an accurate read. I know her well enough by now I’m pretty sure I can spot the signs if she’s hiding anything but she can disguise her vocal stress patterns over the phone,” Felicity told them. “And also, the truth is, I really need to talk to her about some other personal stuff and I owe it to her to say what I have to say face to face.” She sighed, “She’s my friend; I like her. She helped me out a few times, trained me; she even spent a couple of nights on my couch. I should have already called her by now but I’ll get in touch with her ASAP and let you know what I find out. My gut tells me she’s not a part of this. I don’t know,” she said, running her hand over her smoothed back hair and fiddling with her sleek ponytail. “I’ll let you guys know if I get vibe from her but I’m going to call it and say that, whatever is going on, Sara is still on the side of the angels. If she wanted to screw us over she could have done it years ago so it wouldn’t make sense to wait until now to do it.”

“You said she and Queen were running hot and cold; could it be a lover’s quarrel thing? A woman scorned and all that?” Barbara suggested.

She shook her head, “They aren’t like that with each other. No matter what goes down between them they’re beyond all that crap. Their relationship is complicated and more than a little bizarre, but they don’t play games with each other. We’ve all gone through too much for her to do that to him or to me.”

Barbara offered her a sympathetic smile, “Understood. What about Oliver; how does he feel about her?” She asked. “Friend? Foe? Undecided? Or is she a shadow shag?”

“A what?” Tim sputtered.

“It’s what I call the ‘frenemies’ you Bat-boys go ‘bump in the night’ with,” Barbara explained, eyes
twinkling in amusement.

“Noted and stored for future usage,” Felicity snorted. “They hook up but he says it’s casually casual, I think it’s more. Sara is somewhat adventurous in regards to personal relationships and she assures me she feels the same way as he does so it’s possible. She and Oliver are very similar people and he is definitely commitment-phobic but, like I said before, they’re weird with each other. He cares about her and she cares about him but…there’s something off about them. It’s like this weird magnetic thing that pulls them together but the minute they touch the polarity shifts. Lots of angsty guilt between them.” She paused, “Speaking of angst, I should mention that Sara was in a relationship with a fellow assassin named Nyssa for a long time. The first time she left it was pretty intense. I don’t know what happened the last time they split but I think it was a bit more mutual this last go ‘round. Still, if Nyssa shows up you can expect a lot of angsty goodness to follow.”


“Because everyone knows that women only have sex with each other in the hopes that a man will someday come and join them or at least watch, right Timmy?” Barbara asked mockingly.

“Well, that’s what happens in all those movies Tam won’t let me watch in her apartment anyway,” Tim answered earnestly. “Besides, Sara’s bi,” he said with a huge grin.

“Moving on,” Barbara said, rolling her eyes at him.

Felicity shook her head before continuing, “Sara’s sister, Laurel, also had a relationship with Oliver and it tends to bleed over into Arrow business so you should be aware of what to expect,” she said with a disgruntled sigh. “They had this big push me/pull me thing before the island and afterwards he ruined his relationship with his best friend over her then his friend died and she blamed the Arrow. Afterwards she joined the DA’s office and led a capture and contain with extreme prejudice taskforce to go after him; ‘him’ being the Arrow, not Oliver. She was still in the dark back then,” she clarified. “While she was playing whack-a-mole with the Arrow, she was tearing herself up about Tommy—that’s the dead boyfriend slash Oliver’s best friend—and developed a drug and alcohol problem.”

“Holy fuck, it’s like ‘As the Mask Turns’ down there!” Tim said, riveted, “Then what happened?”

Barbara snapped her napkin at him. “You really are such a girl, Timmy!” She snorted as he defended himself by tossing a piece of edamame at her.

“What happened was she lost her job, almost got disbarred, nearly got killed by the Huntress when she was dropped in the shit by her ex-boss who was too much of a pussy to risk his own neck, got her job back after he got fired, went through a whole lot of other shit, decided to become the next Black Canary which led to even more shit, before having a nervous breakdown a few months ago and is trying to regroup and heal but she’s still a definite a pressure point with Oliver. Her breakdown and Oliver’s constant back and forth between her and her sister has led to a few nasty confrontations so try not to engage her if at all possible.”

“What do you mean?” Tim asked. “You just said she was a mask at some point; is she one of the team friends or is she an outsider?”

“She’s kind of a mask, but is more of a part-time mask-slash-bounty hunter. Think of it as less of an ‘operates under the cover of night’ thing and more of a ‘semi-legitimate law enforcement but in tight leather pants’ kind of thing. She operates under the handle ‘Manhunter’ now and she sometimes works with the Arrow, but I’d keep her as far outside as you can. Like I said, she’s in a fragile place
with her recovery and getting involved with Arrow business full-tilt this soon after her breakdown would just push her back over the edge. As it is, she already tends to brush up a little too close for comfort and Oliver has a bad habit of dropping his frosty around her.” She looked at Barbara apologetically, “Unfortunately when she’s spiraling she also has a tendency to get bitchy with any woman Oliver spends time with so you might want to curb your red-headedness just in case she starts her snark.”

“One of those, huh?” Barbara said wearily. “I never could understand women who get all tangled up in toxic relationships then spend the rest of their lives targeting the ex’s currents. I mean, I bitch about Dick and his obsession to mount anything with red hair that’s taller than he is, but I’m not going to seek out Princess Fire Crotch to give her a piece of my mind. If she can cure him of his shit then more power to her! Hell, I’ll buy her a toaster oven if she can drag him to the altar and get him to stick it out to the finish.”

“Princess Fire Crotch!” Tim snickered. “God, I love girl talk; the food, the cattiness, the interesting additions to my ever-growing vocabulary…”

Both women cut their eyes at Tim before Felicity spoke again. “To be fair it’s not entirely her fault. Besides having to deal with her bipolar and addiction issues, Oliver is bad with endings so he keeps closing the door while leaving the window cracked and I can only imagine that has to be confusing for her. Plus,” she added ruefully, “he did cheat on her a bazillion times, and with her sister to boot, so you can see why seeing him with other women would be a trigger for her.” She sighed, “I should mention a related pressure point while we’re on the subject: Oliver has a son.”

“Seriously?” Tim asked in surprise. “Since when?”

“Apparently since he was eighteen,” she told them reluctantly. “He got a girl pregnant and his mom paid her off to pretend she had a miscarriage and to have the baby out of town.”

“Yeesh,” Barbara cringed. “Granny sounds like a peach.”

“Moira was a very interesting character, let me tell you,” Felicity said ruefully. “He reconnected with Sandra Hawke and his son, Connor, last year under less than optimal circumstances. He doesn’t have contact with them as they were forced to go underground for their own safety but they’re on his pressure point list for sure. Plus, I should mention this; he got her pregnant while he was dating Laurel pre-island and when she found out that led to a lot of friction.”

Barbara turned to Tim. “How attached are you to ‘As the Mask Turns’? Because I’m thinking ‘All My Vigilantes’ or ‘One Mask to Live’ instead.”

“Yeah, I’ll be the first to admit it; things get pretty One Tree Hill fairly quickly in Starling, so that’s something for you guys to look forward to,” Felicity said with a cringe, “I mean, first he was with her and Sara, then he was with her, then he was with Sara, then her, then Sara, then her again…”

She grimaced, “He hasn’t cheated on her since college, every time he’s been with someone since getting back from the island he’s been pretty good about only being with one woman at a time, but I understand why she’s gun-shy. I mean, it’s weird dating sisters; I know that. It’s gross, bizarre, and definitely unhealthy, but it’s not all on him. Sara and Oliver share a traumatic history together and Laurel was his first love so that’s why he keeps getting drawn back to them but they keep letting him in, so what do I know? At least Sara has moved on, I think. Even when they were together, their relationship was never as intense as the one he has with her sister.”

“Yeah, no, no guy is that hot,” Barbara told her flatly. She turned to Tim and smacked his leg as he was messing with his phone.
“Ow! Shit!” He yelped.

“Pay attention!” She told him. “Felicity is telling us about all the incredibly stupid women who live in Starling. You might actually have a shot at adding to your numbers.”

“Funny,” he said with a grimace then looked at his phone, “What the--!” He looked up at her with an expression of pure disgust, “How the hell do you know about this shit?”

“What’s that?” Barbara asked, craning her head to look then grinned, “You’re still on the pony play thing?”

“Why would someone do that?” Tim asked flashing the screen towards Felicity.

Felicity tilted her head sideways as she tried to see what he was talking about. “Um…someone who really liked My Pretty Pony as a kid maybe?”

Tim shook his head, “Seriously, how is that sexy? Instead of ‘pony play’ they should just call it ‘ass flags’ and get it over with.”

“Hee!” Barbara snickered and snatched Tim’s phone from him, “Ride ‘em cowboy! Can you imagine what it’s like around the ranch after a nice big bowl of beans around the campfire? Talk about letting your freak flag fly.”

“Or flutter,” Felicity suggested.

“Give me back my phone!” Tim said snatching it back and exiting off the screen. He glared at Barbara then Felicity, “You both look like these sweet, innocent brainy type chicks but in truth you’re both a couple of sicko perverts, you know that?”

“So says the guy who wears a codpiece and has nipples built into his armor,” Felicity shot back.

“Good one!” Barbara said giving her a high five. “Man, I miss having you around Gotham. Damn Baby, you can still hang with the cool kids.”

“Thanks!” She said with a wide grin.

Tim’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline, “So, wait; I’m one of the cool kids?”

“You’re hanging with us, right?” Barbara pointed out. “Remember, Tech Girls do it Beta, Timmy.”

Felicity’s face fell, “Damn.”

Barbara looked over at her, “What?”

“I broke that mug you gave me.”

“How?”

Her lips twisted into a grimace, “I threw it at Bruce’s head.”

Tim and Barbara both looked at her and grinned.

“In that case, Chickie; it died an honorable death,” she said with a chuckle.

“Hell, if you promise to do it again I’ll buy you ten mugs,” Tim promised.
“Finish telling us about Ollie’s magic wand and how it turns otherwise smart women stupid,” Barbara told her.

“It’s not--!” Felicity furrowed her brow in consternation then sighed, “Okay, so I don’t get it myself but I’m not exactly in the best position to judge, you know? At least she’s only slept with one masked vigilante to my knowledge.” She frowned, “Well, one vigilante and one psychopathic politician turned leader of an army of super soldiers bent on controlling the city.”

“Say what now?” Tim said, as he looked up from his phone.

“Sebastian Blood,” she said. “They kind of had a thing but I don’t know how far it got. Anyway, that’s water under the bridge,” she said dismissively.

“Is it me or does this Laurel chick seem to have a lot of water under her bridges?” Tim asked Barbara in a sotto voice.

“Bitch is going to have to build an ark if she keeps it up,” Barbara agreed.

Well, they weren’t wrong, Felicity thought ruefully. “I mean, a woman like Laurel…you’d think a strong, intelligent woman like her would have moved on a long time ago but she’s stuck. She’s very Type A and part of her still thinks they need to be together because that was the plan since they were in high school. I don’t even think it’s about Oliver as much as it’s about crossing something off a list. That combined with their shitty coping skills and his weirdness with her sister… Honestly, I think she just needs to stay the hell away from him for her own sake. She’s just one of those people with a very rigid world view and she doesn’t process things well.”

“Don’t defend that shit,” Barbara said scornfully. “I don’t care what ‘issues’ she has going on, if a man fucks around on me with my own sister and fathers a kid while I’m dating him, I’m not going to be hanging on in the fringes and looking for a way back in unless it’s to cut his dick off and show it to him.”

“Ouch,” Tim breathed.

“Yeah, well, it’s not all on Oliver, not that I’m defending him,” she said quickly. “I’ve had to go toe to toe with him on more than one occasion to remind him to get his head out of his ass, but a lot of Laurel’s issues begin and end with Laurel. Then again, I’ll admit I’m not fond of her so take that with a grain of salt. I feel for her, don’t get me wrong, but I am not a fan,” Felicity said with a grimace. “She got a little too liberal with the scathing remarks about my dubious status as Oliver’s ‘secretary’ a few times and, I’m not sure because the club was a little loud and she was pretty drunk, but I believe she suggested he fire me and there may have been some reference to my hair color but I can’t be sure.”

“What did you do?” Tim snorted, “Because if she pulled that shit with Tam, I’d have to bail her out of jail or drag her out of there while she still had clumps of bloody hair clutched in her fists.”

“Yeah, no. No, I didn’t go there,”” Felicity said, shaking her head ruefully. “I wanted to but, needless to say, I had to bite my tongue because, as I may have mentioned, Oliver goes mushy in the brain when it comes to her. You cannot, under any circumstances, talk shit about her in any way, shape, or form around him.” She looked at Barbara. “Seriously Babs, it’s a thing with him so I’m giving you the straight skinny just in case. If you do run into her and he goes stupid, pull him out, but resist slapping him into a triple digit IQ. If she engages you just take it out on a pint of Ben and Jerry’s. Oliver freezes up around her and he cannot function, even when she goes straight for his balls.”

“Charming; who else has Mr. Happy Pants been sinking his arrows into that we need to look out
“Isabel,” Felicity admitted reluctantly, “but you knew that. When you go in as his EA you will more than likely become a target for her ‘office whore’ shtick so be prepared for comments about him switching a blonde for a redhead or something along those lines.”

“Timothy!” Barbara barked.

“What? What did I do now?” Tim jumped.

“Nothing,” Barbara told him, “but as your mentor and un-official big sister you need to listen and pay very close attention to what I’m about to tell you.” She paused for dramatic effect. “First; never be the kind of man who dates crazy bitches. The sex may be hot but it’s not worth it, especially if it means waking up and finding a big pot of bunny soup on the stove.”

“Bunny soup?” Tim asked, confused.

“Fatal Attraction,” Felicity clarified in a low tone.

“And number two,” Barbara continued, ignoring their aside, “while we are down there you will be on Bitch-Slap Patrol, meaning you will keep me from slapping a bitch and that includes Oliver Queen.”

“Duly noted,” Tim said.

Felicity sighed at their antics, “The last inside/outside member of the team is Quentin Lance, father of the Lance sisters and a cop with the SCPD.”

“Friendly or outsider?” Barbara asked.

Felicity wrinkled her nose, “Eh, that’s complicated.”

“So what else is new with the cast of this soap opera?” Barbara asked dryly.

She pressed her lips together and gave them a funny look, “Okay, here’s the thing; as far as Oliver and Dig know, Lance was not aware of the fact that Oliver is the Arrow until roughly six months ago.”

“I love the way you just worded that,” Barbara told her with a raised eyebrow.

“So….” Tim prompted.

“He’s known for almost two years,” Felicity told them. “Well, probably over two years. Actually he’s a pretty good cop so he was pretty sure he was the Arrow after the first week.”

“How do you know that if they don’t?” Tim asked her slowly.

“It’s…it’s a long story,” Felicity said at last. “Needless to say, Lance and I used to have an agreement where we’d pretend that he didn’t know when Oliver was within earshot but, when it was just us, we could talk freely.”

“So what changed?” Tim asked. “How was he officially read in?”

Images of a night filled with blood, hot rain, and Slade flooded her mind.
Detective…” The gun was heavy and slick from the rain and blood that caked her hands.

“Take it,” he told her as he panted breathlessly. He looked down at his pants leg that was soaked in blood and pointed to his feet. “Reach into my boot and give me my back up piece.” She did as he asked and he thumbed off the safety. “Okay, sweetheart, you still have that detonator?”

She nodded, the rain getting in her eyes and fogging her glasses. “I’ve got it.”

He looked at her steadily and licked his lips, his face strained from pain and stress. “Are you sure about this?”

“It’s the only way,” she told him faintly. “Can you manage?”

He nodded sharply, “You keep him distracted and I’ll plant the charge.” He laid his hand on her cheek and she found herself leaning into his calloused palm. “You listen to me; you do whatever you have to do to stay alive.”

“I--”

“Felicity!” He said sharply and she looked into his deep brown eyes that somehow reminded her of Lucius. “Whatever it takes, sweetheart. Kill them before they can kill you, do you hear me? Promise me…”

“I promise…”

She fidgeted in her chair and forced herself into the present. “It’s…a long story. We were running an op and the rest of the team got in trouble so I had no choice but to call Lance and we had to go in after them. After that the cat was pretty much out of the bag.” She forced a smile, “I’ll call him before you get to Starling and give him your contact information. You’ll like him; sometimes he’d even drop by my place to cook dinner when Sara would stay with me,” she told them with a shrug.

“Wait…” Tim narrowed his eyes at her, “Why didn’t he want Oliver to know he knew?”

Barbara gave him a look, “Seriously? Oliver slept with not one, but two of his daughters, turned one into a vigilante ex-assassin, turned the other into a vengeful alcoholic bipolar DA turned vigilante who got sent to the nut-hatch last time he played ‘hide-the-pickle’ with her, and runs around the city shooting arrows into people and, meanwhile, he’s the cop helping him do it.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tim said slowly. “I kind of get it now.”

“My question is what’s your connection to Lance?” Barbara asked her.

Again her mind flashed back.
“Here,” she said handing him her glasses.

“Don’t you need these?” He asked her as he stuffed them in the pocket of his tee shirt.

“No,” she said quietly. “Not anymore.”

She turned to go but he reached for her hand.

He looked at her for an extended moment before speaking, “In case I don’t get to say it again…” he fell silent but the look he gave her told her all she needed to know.

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“Like I said, we’ve shared a lot of history and more than a few close calls together,” she said and, despite her best efforts, the darkness she kept hidden most of the time made its way into her tone. “Let’s just say that we’re foxhole buddies.”

“I’d love to hear some of those foxhole stories sometime,” Tim said as he locked onto her expression.

She forced a smile, “Not a chance, Timmy,” she said borrowing Barbara’s teasing nickname for him. “I tell you, you tell Tam, and then she tells the world, and the next thing you know I’m dealing with Bruce and his pissy ass mood swings; no thanks.”

“Now that we’re more familiar with the seedier side fill us in on the quirks of the man himself as well as the rest of them,” Barbara said, changing the subject.

“Oliver: Loyal, fierce, dedicated, bit of a control freak; he’s basically Bruce but with the complications of a personal life,” she told them. “The downside is guilt, guilt, guilt. Tons of guilt.”

“Not the noble yet damaged hero shtick, I want details on the soft underbelly,” she told her. “If Tim and I are going in we have to know his team’s weaknesses so we can be ready for them.”

“Look, this is all interesting but isn’t all this gossipy information and hunting out soft spots in their personalities a little bit like something Bruce would do?” Tim asked askance. “It feels like we’re asking Felicity to write protocols for her own team or something.”

“That’s exactly it,” Barbara said to him, her expression devoid of any kind of playfulness. “I’m not worried about these guys holding up their end when it comes to the physical stuff but, nine times out of ten, it’s the personal shit that gets you killed. A man can be a stone-cold warrior but if he has a drinking problem, or difficulty keeping his pants on, or if he tends to go rogue, that directly impacts the mission. You never know how his reflexes will be, if he’ll drop the ball to feed the monkey on his back, or if he’s vulnerable to honey-traps.”

“Barbara’s right,” Felicity said quietly. She looked Tim in the eye, her jaw set. “As much as I’d like to say that none of that stuff should matter, it does. I love those guys but when they’re engaged in a mission and I’m running coms, I need to know I can count on them to do what I tell them to do and be where I send them. Part of that means knowing their weaknesses and compensating for them.”
She gestured between Barbara and herself, “Barbara and I learned that lesson a long time ago the hard way. People can get hurt or killed if we can’t control the flow of information accurately. If we expect you to be at point A and you go off the reservation due to some other crap we haven’t compensated for, everything falls apart. As the techies when you guys are in the field we don’t just direct you to the action, we control you. If you guys are the id, all instinct, muscle memory, and split second reflexes, then our job is to act as ego and super-ego. We have to be the voice of reason, the brain to your brawn, and sometimes that means having to know how to manipulate you as well.”

“So we’re just puppets dancing on the end of your string?” Tim asked slowly.

“Dance, my pretties, dance,” Barbara said wiggling her fingers in pantomime.

“Damn,” Tim said, looking slightly taken aback by the idea. “I kind of feel used right now.”

“Be flattered instead that we’re showing you what’s behind the curtain,” Barbara told him matter of factly. “When we’re down there I’ll be handling Oliver and Diggle but you’ll be handling this Roy guy. You might not be on tech but you will have to be on your game when it comes to risk assessment. You’re down there to train him and that also means having to learn to handle him.”

“Look, I appreciate that you guys are way smarter than any of us are but I’m not stupid and I’m willing to bet the rest of those guys are pretty quick on the uptake as well. Don’t you think that we can handle the truth?” He shook his head, “I just don’t see how manipulating your own team is justifiable.”

“Okay Tim-Tim, let’s see if you’re right.” She clapped her hands and rubbed them together, “I’m about to give you your first lesson as a handler, ready?” Barbara waited for him to nod affirmatively, “You’re handling your man in the field and he has three objectives: disable a bomb, free a hundred hostages locked in a room next to the bomb, and engage the enemy. Are you following me so far?”

“Bomb, hostages, bad guys,” he said with a nod.

“There are two buildings several hundred yards apart. The bomb and hostages are in Building A, bad guys are in Building B. Which building do you tell your guy to go to first?”

“Building A,” Tim said automatically.

“Why?”

“That’s easy; preventing the loss of innocent lives always trumps the takedown,” he said as though it was a no-brainer.

“First rule; it’s never that easy,” Barbara said drolly. “Here’s the twist: The bad guys have a hostage in Building B as insurance. If your guy defuses the bomb and frees the hostages they kill the single hostage in their custody. The bomb is counting down and he only has time to do one or the other; how does that impact your original decision?”

“It doesn’t,” Tim frowned. “It’s not pretty but it comes down to a numbers game; one hostage isn’t worth the loss of a hundred lives.”

Felicity tensed, sensing what Barbara was about to say. Once upon a time she sat where Tim was sitting now and received the exact same ‘life lesson’. She also knew that she’d failed to use the lessons Barbara was trying to teach Tim and it led to the deaths of 503 people including Oliver’s best friend.

“The mask in the field is Batman and the hostage is Felicity,” Barbara told him, her voice cool and
composed. “Handle it.”

Tim paled and swallowed as he looked from her to Barbara, uncertainty written all over his face. “I, uh…”

“No time to hem and haw, Timmy,” Barbara told him. “The bomb is counting down, Bruce is engaged, where do you direct him?”

“Do I tell him Felicity is the hostage?” He asked confused.

“Up to you, you’re the handler,” Barbara said, her tone sharp. “Counting down, Tim! Move your ass, your man is in the field; what do you do?” He looked at Felicity again without speaking. “Tim! Focus! What do you do?”

Tim looked down at his feet and sighed, “If I tell Bruce that Felicity is the hostage then he’ll go for Building B and the hostages will die.”

“So what do you do?” She asked, “Tell him or save the hostages?”

“I’m one person, Tim,” Felicity broke in quietly. “You said it yourself; it’s a numbers game.”

“If I did that Bruce would never forgive me,” Tim said, shaking his head.

“That’s the kind of choices you make when you’re a handler, Tim,” Barbara said, her voice softening. “Whether you realize it or not you profiled Bruce just now; you just wrote his protocol. You knew had that been any other hostage he would have gone for the bomb first; you, me, Dick, even Alfred. You know he would have been tempted but there is a 99% chance he would have taken the risk and gone for the bomb first. Felicity is his pressure point; the one variable that changes the game. Once she became the hostage you could no longer count on Bruce fulfilling his prime objective; why?”

“He doesn’t have to answer that,” Felicity said quietly.

Barbara shot her a hard look, “I love you Chickie but this is my Padawan. Butt out.” She looked at Tim again, her voice hard and demanding. “Why?”

“She makes Bruce act unpredictably,” Tim said dully.

“So what do you do?”

“This isn’t fun anymore,” Tim said with an irritated exhalation of breath.

“Not meant to be,” she told him.

“I tell him to disable the bomb and I don’t reveal the identity of the hostage until it’s done,” He said at last.

“End of lesson,” Barbara told him. “Remember it.”

Felicity reached out and placed her hand on Tim’s knee to get his attention, “I’m partially responsible for the deaths of 503 people, including Oliver’s best friend, because I made the mistake of not compensating for his pressure points. I should have gone into the field to disarm the Markov device and I allowed him to direct me from the field to send in a proxy. I should have gone in myself and not told him and had Quentin Lance act as my backup. If I had, we could have stopped both devices. Furthermore Laurel was at her office in the Glades and he went off course before I could pull him
back. If I had kept quiet or lied to him, Laurel might have survived anyway. Tommy lost his life saving her and Oliver got there just in time to see him die. Had I not told him I could have controlled his movements better.”

“You would have taken the chance that she could die knowing how much she means to him?” Tim asked. “You could live with that?”

“I live everyday knowing that 503 people are dead because I didn’t control the flow of information,” she told him.

“This job isn’t fun,” Barbara told him. “I’ve worked both sides of the game. When you’re in the mask it’s all adrenaline and glory. You get to be the hero, rescue the hostages, get to trounce the baddies and drop bad puns, but as the guy holding the wall you never get to do any of that and, even though you did your part to save lives, your team will never know half of what you did in order to accomplish that. They can’t know. We keep as many secrets as we reveal, we stand apart from the action so they can do their jobs. You’re going to be handling a guy who has some serum in his veins that ramps him up to a hundred. He’s already unpredictable and dangerous; your job is to reel that in and redirect it. You won’t be there as Red Robin, this isn’t the Tim Drake show; you’re there to get this guy to the point where he can function as a member of a team. Lives will be saved or lost because of you and what you can teach this guy. Your job is to housebreak him, not outshine him.”

“But they’re also going to need me in the field, right?” Tim said with a frown. “Am I going on patrols or just hanging around the basement with this guy?”

Barbara sat back and looked at Felicity, “What do you think?”

Felicity thought about it. “At first I think you should stick to straight training but Roy isn’t exactly a patient student. Oliver tried training him that way in the beginning and it was a complete bust.” She sighed and ran her hand over her hair to smooth it back, “It’s up to you on how you train him, but yeah, if Oliver wants you in the field then do it but don’t get caught up in field work. If it looks like he’s getting territorial with Roy by dragging you out on missions as a distraction then remind him of why you’re there in the first place. And don’t pussyfoot around it; he’s just as pigheaded as Bruce ever was so be firm.”

“Handling a man in the field as opposed to on coms is more difficult in a lot of ways but the same rules apply,” Barbara told him. “You’re doing double duty so you need to let him have his lead but when shit gets real you have to maintain control and know when to pull him back. Break him in training so when you’re in the field he listens to you. That means you need to gain his respect early on, Tim. Bust his ass, teach him quick that being stronger doesn’t make him better. He’ll try to show you he’s an alpha right from the get go but if you lose your temper you won’t be doing anyone any favors. He’ll be looking for a fight so don’t give it to him. Make it look effortless and kick his ass until he figures out that you’re the guy he wants to follow then maintain that respect. That’s the name of the game: control, control, control. I can’t interfere too much in your thing because you’re his trainer, not me. If I step in every time he shows his teeth it will eat away at your credibility. Same goes for my end; if someone challenges me then you need to step back and let me take care of myself. Chances are they’ll see the chair or my tits and assume I’m the weak link.” He snorted and she tossed him a wink before continuing, “Establish a rapport but don’t ever let him forget you’re the Jedi, he’s the Padawan, got it?”

“I got it,” Tim said after taking a minute to let it sink in. “Okay, tell me about Roy.”

Felicity centered herself, “Roy is a former gang member and thief who was involved with Thea, Oliver’s sister. He’s been exposed to Mirakuru which, as you know, gives him super-strength but it also makes him susceptible to bouts of rage that can lead to a psychotic break.” She took a breath.
This next bit would hit on events that she really would rather not talk about but needs must.

“About two years ago we ran into some trouble,” she said quietly. “It was a man by the name of Slade Wilson; have you heard of him?”

“Can’t say I have,” Tim said with a frown, then his memory seemed to click, “Wait, isn’t that the dude who kidnapped Thea Queen and murdered Moira a few years ago?”

“Yeah,” Felicity breathed, squirming in her seat. Her stomach began to twist and she was starting to regret the choice of sushi for dinner.

“What’s his handle?” Barbara asked, eyes sharp.

Of course Barb would ask that, Felicity thought. “Deathstroke.”

They both spoke at the same time.

“Holy shit!” Tim exclaimed.

“You ran into this guy two years ago and you didn’t check in?” Barbara asked angrily.

“Big ass meta motherfucker; fond of swords and can rip through a steel door like it’s toilet paper?” Tim tacked on.

“He wasn’t a meta-human,” she said. “He was injected with the Mirakuru serum.” She sighed, “I take it that you’ve run into him before.”

“Bruce and Dick have; a few times,” Tim told her.

“And they barely came out of it intact,” the other woman said, eyeing Felicity with a hint of irritation. “What’s your team’s connection to him?”

“And why did he go after the Queens?” Tim added.

“It’s…complicated,” she said hesitantly. “He and Oliver have a history. Had a history,” she corrected. “He’s dead now.”

“Are you sure?” Barbara asked. “The first time Bruce ran up against him, the only reason he got away was by knocking him off a twenty story building. He thought he was dead for sure until he couldn’t find the body and then he showed up again a few months later still pissed off about it. Even working as a team he got in several good shots and barely broke a sweat doing it.”

“I’m sure,” she said in a muted tone. “Not even Slade can come back from that.”

“What’s the history between them?” Tim asked. “You do know that Deathstroke used to freelance for the League right?”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Felicity said, shaking her head. “Back when Slade was a member of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service’s special ops Team 7, he was sent in to investigate suspected terrorist movements along the rescue and recovery of General Yao Fei who was purposely shipwrecked on the island of Lian Yu. Yao Fei was falsely accused of the massacre of an entire village and the Australian government sent Slade and his partner in to recover him so that he could testify in front of the United Nations War Crimes Commission so that the true perpetrators could be made to answer for the deaths. They were captured and his partner, Billy Wintergreen, turned against him and allied himself with the enemy, and tried to kill him in order to save his own skin. A lot of
other stuff happened, most of which I don’t really know, but basically Slade and Oliver teamed up on the island and helped each other survive. Wintergreen captured Oliver and was going to execute him when Slade stepped in and killed Wintergreen by stabbing him through the eye with a sword.”

“That’s…intense,” Tim said with a sharp exhalation of air.

Felicity nodded, “Yeah, well, they became friends and Slade trained Oliver, taking up where Yao Fei left off along with Yao Fei’s daughter, Shado. Shado and Oliver fell in love and Slade stood back and let them have their thing even though he was also in love with her.”

“More soap opera drama,” Barb said with a grimace.

“Wait, this is getting good,” Tim said leaning forward.

Felicity rolled her eyes at him despite the heaviness in the pit of her stomach, “A mad scientist type named Anthony Ivo was searching for the Mirakuru,” she paused, emotion welling up within her but she forced it back down so she could finish. “He was, um…anyway, Slade was hurt; he was going to die, so Shado, Slade, Sara, and Oliver found this Japanese sub with the serum and, in order to save him, they injected him with it.”

“So you’re saying that it’s Queen’s fault that psycho was created?” Tim asked with a scowl.

“No!” Felicity said emphatically. “He was trying to save his life. They had no idea what would happen. It was a total Hail Mary pass.”

“Hey, glass houses, Timmy,” Barbara reminded him cuttingly.

“Sorry,” he said contritely. “Go on with the story.”

“Anyway, Ivo showed up and captured all of them except Slade because they thought he was dead, then he took them all outside and held a gun to Sara and Shado’s heads. He ordered Oliver to choose, Oliver refused, he pointed his gun at Sara, and when Oliver tried to take the bullet for Sara, he turned the gun on Shado and killed her.” She let that sink in before continuing. “Slade showed up supercharged and wiped the floor with them. Afterwards he began to show signs of psychosis and, when he found out that Oliver ‘chose’ Sara over Shado, he lost his shit and went totally Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. From that moment on, he decided that Oliver had to pay for her death. He tortured him, stalked him, kidnapped his sister, murdered his mom…” She shook her head again, “Oliver isn’t the most forthcoming guy when it comes to the island stuff but my theory is that the Mirakuru caused Slade to confuse his ex-partner Billy Wintergreen with Oliver. Oliver and Slade got into some kind of epic battle before he left the island and Oliver took out his eye with an arrow, thinking he’d killed him. The whole ‘eye for an eye’ thing only served to reinforce Slade’s delusions instead.”

“So Slade went after Moira Queen because of Shado?” Tim’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“He went after everyone and everything Oliver held dear,” she corrected him. “His mother, his sister, everyone and everything including the entire city.”

“How did Queen manage to take him down if even an arrow to the eye couldn’t do it?” Tim asked.

“According to Bruce and Dick, they threw everything they had at him. Hell, the batarangs bounced off of him so Bruce had no choice but to aim his grappling gun at him and he bent the hook!”

“And what about the Army of super-soldiers?” Barbara asked. “One Slade had to be hard enough, but a whole army of super-powered psychos?”

“We managed to drive the Blood Cult back out when Sara contacted Nyssa and she brought League
reinforcements to repel the Army of Blood while Diggle recruited the Suicide Squad to help stop Waller from wiping the entire city out with a drone strike. While we were busy with all that, Merlyn showed up to protect Thea and whisked her out of town. As for how Oliver took out Slade; he didn’t,” she said dully, unable to meet their eyes.

“Wait; the League, Merlyn, and The Suicide Squad rescued you guys?” Tim asked incredulously before his voice deepened in anger, “Why the hell didn’t you call us? I was ready to come get you! The airports were all shut down but I was going to take the jet there anyway, screw the FAA and Homeland! I mean, what the fuck, Felicity? I was in the air—hell, we were halfway there until Tam called and said she talked to you and you said you were at an out of town conference in Vegas that weekend!”

“Listen, I can tell you about Roy or you can yell at me, Tim; you choose,” Felicity told him, her gaze unwavering even as the other man’s expression hardened in anger.

“I’m thinking,” Tim bit out.

She grimaced, “Look, I tried to call you guys; I did! I was going to say ‘fuck it’ and do the big reveal to Dig and Oliver because, by that time, it didn’t matter anymore. We had several groups, all of whom had tried to kill us at one time or another, calling a temporary truce but I wasn’t about to relax my guard around them for a second, believe me! The last thing I wanted was to be in the middle of some Tolkien-esque Battle of the Five Kingdoms but unfortunately, we weren’t in a position to turn down help from anyone. I wanted you guys there; even Bruce by that point! I did everything I could to make that happen but things were a bit hectic since communications were down, Blood’s people and ARGUS completely shut down the grid, Waller had a Reaper coming at us with a full payload ready to take out the entire city; by the time I got through to Watchtower, no one was answering so I had to just make do.”

“Shit,” Tim said, rubbing his hand over his eyes wearily. “I’m… I’m sorry, Baby. I just…we…if we had known…”

“Yeah, me too…” Barbara cleared her throat guiltily. “We had our own crisis around that time and ours was League related as well only they weren’t exactly being helpful.”

“We were…out of the country,” Tim said grimly. “It wasn’t until we were on our way back that I finally got Tam’s voicemails about Starling. I guess, by then, it was all over.” His jaw clenched and he fixed her with a narrowed gaze, “Still, you should have told me the truth when I asked if you were okay. Were you okay?”

“It was as okay as it ever gets,” Felicity said casting her eyes towards the floor. “When I called Tam after we were out of crisis-mode she said….she… she told me about Damian,” she took a breath. “I just figured you guys had enough on your plates and, besides, there was nothing left for you to do.”

“We could have come anyway,” Tim said with a black look. “You still--!”

“Tim!” Barbara barked at him. “Cool it with the Bruce impersonation and let her talk! Just…tell the story, Chickie,” Barbara told her, again giving Tim a warning look. “It sounds like you guys had a shit storm and a half on your hands and I think we can all sympathize with that, can’t we?” She asked Tim pointedly.


“ Doesn’t matter,” she said finally meeting their gazes, a certain hardness that hadn’t been present
before six months ago creeping into her tone. “It’s done. The only reason I’m even telling you about him is because of Roy.”

Tim opened his mouth to speak but Barbara, her expression deepening with understanding, placed a warning hand on his arm. “Tell us about Roy,” she told her. Tim gave Barbara a sharp look but stayed silent.

Ever the obedient Padawan, Felicity thought, “Two years ago, Slade Wilson came to Starling to wage war on Oliver, his family, and the entire city. Like Tim mentioned, he murdered Moira right in front of Thea and Oliver. He murdered a lot of people,” she murmured before her voice rose again. “He wanted to build an army of super-soldiers with the Mirakuru and, knowing that Roy had it in his system, he nearly drained him dry by transfusing his blood into his men.”

“That’s how he created the Army of Blood? Roy?” Tim asked, his gaze narrowing on her.

“Again, it wasn’t exactly by choice,” Felicity said with an edge to her tone. “They bled him dry to the point that, had he not had the Mirakuru, he would have been dead. Luckily, along with the healing factor, it ramps up red blood cell production which kept him alive but just barely. We transfused new blood into him but at full strength the Mirakuru bonds at a cellular level. He went into a healing coma but, when he woke up, he was in a psychotic rage. He was delusional, out of control, and violent. It wasn’t his fault but…” her voice trailed off.

“But what?” The other woman prompted.

“There were casualties,” Felicity said at last. “Oliver and Sara managed to take him down with a massive dose of Pit Viper venom but not before taking a few lumps. Sara fractured her arm and Oliver got out of it with some torn ligaments, cartilage damage, and a fracture to his kneecap.”

“How did he snap out of it?” Tim asked, his expression still thunderous.

“It took a while but we put him in a coma again using the venom and he eventually woke up and was in control again after we injected him with some anti-serum,” she told them. “It was…rough for the team in the meantime though. He attacked Sin, that’s Sara’s foster daughter of sorts,” she explained, “and he also went after Thea. He could have easily killed them, he was that far gone. Sara wanted to put him down. She thought it was the most humane option. After he killed someone while on a rampage she felt he was too dangerous to live, especially since he was showing signs of brain damage due to blood loss, but Oliver wouldn’t allow it. It caused a rift between them for a while and he took off after the Blood Army thing to find Thea.”

She took a centering breath, “The reason you need to know this is because, even though he eventually recovered from the brain damage, when he gets angry his control falters and he can become very, very dangerous. Part of the problem with the Mirakuru is that it affects the entire endocrine system and, when I say it ‘affects’ it, I mean at levels that are almost impossible to conceive of outside of science fiction. According to some buddies of mine at Star Labs who got to conduct some tests a few years back, the Adrenal medulla goes into overload causing a massive rush of adrenaline, noradrenaline, dopamine, and enkephalin which puts him in the fight end of fight or flight and deadens his pain response to almost nil. Serotonin levels go off the charts causing exceptionally vivid auditory and visual hallucinations which, combined with the dumping of testosterone and the electrical storm going off in the hypothalamus, causes extreme aggression. His healing factor is equally off the charts. Bullet wounds heal in a matter of minutes and I mentioned the blood cell thing earlier. It binds to thrombopoietin in the bone marrow, stimulating megakaryocytes to produce platelets at an exponential rate making him damn near invulnerable.” She looked Tim dead in the eye, “Roy has worked hard to get his aggression under control but….” she grimaced. “Your only warning will be his hands shaking when the adrenaline hits his bloodstream and then
“You’d better calm him down or get out of his way.”

“Dude sounds like a barrel of laughs,” Tim murmured.

“It’s not his fault,” Felicity told him. “Roy didn’t ask for this; Slade and Blood did this to him. He
was just a normal kid, a good kid, before all this happened. He still is.”

“And there’s nothing anyone can do?” Barbara asked, her brow furrowing in sympathy. “You
mentioned an anti-serum.”

“STAR Labs came up with a ‘cure’ a few years back; the problem is that it caused a potentially fatal
adrenal collapse by shutting down the adrenaline production caused by the Mirakuru instantly. The
effects were similar to something you’d see with patients suffering from Addison’s or Sheehan’s
syndrome only much, much worse and all at once; shock, hypoglycemia, dehydration, disorientation,
profound weakness, orthostatic hypotension, all leading to cardiac ischemia and cardiovascular
collapse. Some of them died when their heart’s stopped and others survived with long-term
aftereffects like arrhythmia, hyperthyroidism, and diabetes. In some of the others the serum attacked
the Mirakuru’s healing factor causing a cytokine cascade consisting of a positive feedback loop
between cytokines and immune cells.” She swallowed as she remembered that nightmarish event and
the screams of those exposed to the ‘cure’. “It worked insomuch as they were no longer practically
invulnerable but their bodies basically attacked themselves. It was…horrifying. At first, they just lost
consciousness like the rest of them and the doctors at ARGUS thought they’d recover after receiving
the same treatments of steroids, intravenous saline, and plasma infusions. It wasn’t until a few days
later that their joints began to swell and they developed autoimmune encephalitis in their brains…it
was incredibly painful and terminal. No one, no one, deserves to die like that,” she said emphatically.

She took a deep breath before continuing, “Roy and Slade were the only exceptions. In them the
serum was only partially successful. It lessened their strength and helped with the rages but it wasn’t
a complete cure because, by then, the Mirakuru serum had altered their DNA. The other patients had
been turned via a blood transfusion so they were never exposed to the pure Mirakuru unlike Slade
and Roy. After he became aware of what he had done during his psychotic break, Roy lobbied to
have us inject him with a second dose but we couldn’t risk him having a bad reaction like some of
the others did; a hollow-point bullet to the brain stem would have been kinder. He actually begged us
to do that at one point but Oliver…” she closed her eyes, “Thea loved him and, even though he
knew it was probably a mistake, he didn’t want to take him away from her. Roy was angry and
resentful for a long time over that. Thea had taken off and he left for a while but they both came back
eventually. Thea showed back up a year ago and Roy came back about six months ago when Slade
returned to Starling in order to protect her and help us.”

“Is that how you guys took Deathstroke down?” Tim asked. “A second dose of this ‘cure’?”

“We tried,” she said quietly. “By then he was expecting it though so, no; that’s not how…” She took
a sharp breath, and raised her eyes to look at them both pleadingly, “Look, I just…I can’t,” she said
licking her lips. “I can’t talk about that, okay?” Tim opened his mouth to speak but, again, Barbara
cut him off at the pass with another squeeze of her hand.

“It’s okay, Baby,” she told her, her wide green eyes filled with a measure of sympathy. “But when
you are ready to talk, we’ll be here.”

“Thanks,” Felicity told her.

Tim seemed to struggle internally for a moment before he gave in with a small growl of resignation,
“Okay, fine. Moving on; you said he was a thief? What’s his skillset; are we talking burglar or
what?”
Felicity pursed her lips, grateful to have the subject dropped at last. “Purse snatcher and typical street punk but teaching him some lock picking and stuff might help with the control issues. It takes a steady hand and a clear mind. What do you think, Barb?”

“Couldn’t hurt,” she shrugged. “Start off slow though. Get him in line and then move on to the other stuff but picking locks is definitely a handy skill to have. You also might want to educate him on the electronic picks as well. Use something that appears sophisticated to a guy like him, help him understand it, and it will build both his trust and his self-confidence.”

Tim nodded, “Selina taught me a few things I might want to try with him. If he has as much trouble controlling his strength as you said then it might help with that.” He sighed, “I have to be honest with you guys, it’s kind of weird being the one in charge for once. Having that much responsibility…” He pulled a face.

Felicity laid a gentle hand on his shoulder and smiled softly, “You’ll be great. Roy’s not so bad once you get used to him and you’ve got the field stuff down pat. Just concentrate on getting to know him. Learn his behavior patterns, let him talk. Learning as much as you can about him and being able to handle him by building a profile might be the only thing that saves his life and yours.”

Tim shot them a dubious look, “So, I shouldn’t feel like I’ve been an unwitting pawn in your secret techie chess game for all these years but instead I should be grateful to be welcomed into the Batman Sex in the City Squad?”

“Congratulations Charlotte, you just popped your cherry,” Barbara told him, the grim mood that had been cast over them lifting.

“Wait, why am I Charlotte?” Tim asked, obviously offended by the idea. “I should be Carrie!”

Barbara shook her head, “Felicity’s Carrie because it’s her team, I’m Miranda—obviously,” she preened and fluffed her red locks, “Beauty and brains; and you’re innocent Charlotte and we’re educating you on how to be a bad-ass bitch.”

“So who’s Samantha?” He frowned.

“Tam,” they both said simultaneously.

“Why Tam?”

Felicity and Barbara exchanged looks before Barbara spoke up, “She fits the character’s profile a little better than either of us do.”

“Combined,” Felicity admitted reluctantly.

“By the power of ten,” Barbara snorted.

“Not that many!” Felicity rolled her eyes heavenward and began to count before stopping suddenly, “Huh, wow that was a busy summer abroad after all.”

“Wait, what?” Tim asked in confusion. He narrowed his eyes at them, “What don’t I know?”

“Just that your girlfriend is definitely above average,” Barbara said with an evil smirk.

“Thanks—hey, wait a minute!” Tim said, doing a spit-take.

“Tim, since when are you so into Sex in the City?” Felicity asked, distracting him.
Tim flushed, suddenly embarrassed. He cleared his throat, “Uh, Tam made me watch all of the DVDs with her?”

“Nice try, Tam hated that show,” Felicity said with a knowing smirk.

He fidgeted in his seat a bit, “Well, I work nights, okay? Daytime TV sucks so when I saw it in the video store I picked it up,” he blushed. “I, um, well, I was kind of expecting it to be a different kind of show, if you know what I mean.”

“How many seasons did you watch?” Felicity asked as Barbara snickered at him.

“All of them,” he admitted, his eyes downcast in embarrassment, “And both the movies.”

“Oh Timothy, the shame,” Barbara tutted.

He turned to Felicity with pleading eyes, “Just don’t tell Luke, okay?”

“I won’t tell him if you promise to stop calling him ‘Weezer’ and quit quoting lines from ‘Steel Magnolias’,” she told him.

“Yeah, but when I do that stuff it’s funny,” he said defensively then wavered, “When he does it it’s just demeaning and potentially hurtful.”

“Oh Timothy,” Barbara sighed, “Watching you crash and burn is more entertaining than the cat video compilations on YouTube.” She looked at Felicity again, “Okay, break’s over, Blondie. Soft underbelly; go.”

“For Oliver it’s guilt and his women and for Diggle it’s Deadshot, Amanda Waller, and ARGUS. On the off chance Floyd Lawton or the Suicide Squad shows up, be aware of the fact he might go off the reservation.” She paused, “Look, things have been strained between ARGUS and the team ever since Dig’s ex-wife, Lyla, almost died last year. She was the Suicide Squad’s handler and, even though she was supposed to be on leave from field assignments because she was pregnant, Waller sent her in and she was nearly killed and lost the baby along with an eye.”

“Did Lawton try to kill her?” Tim asked with a sympathetic look.

“No, supposedly it was a group called HIVE but Dig still blames Waller for it. They had been fighting over her association with ARGUS and we were looking into why HIVE hired Lawton to kill his brother, Andy, a few years back. Lawton and Dig actually formed a kind of uneasy alliance after he revealed who hired him but even he could never tell him what it was all about other than the name of the group. About a year ago, we ran into the Suicide Squad and Lawton slipped Dig a message saying he found a link between ARGUS and HIVE and that he was in danger because of it. Lyla went into ARGUS to find out what he knew even though Dig told her to stay out of it. She tracked HIVE to a remote location and somehow woke up in a warehouse in the middle of nowhere looking like she’d been through a warzone, shot full of holes, and missing an eye. He was convinced for a while that Waller either tipped HIVE off or was covering something up and had Lyla retconned which is why she can’t remember anything.”

“So did Waller do it?” Tim asked.

“No, according to Colonel Trevor. ARGUS supposedly conducted its own in house investigation and cleared her, but who knows?” She shrugged. “Dig still thinks Waller knows more than she’s saying which isn’t exactly beyond the realm of possibility. The last time he got close enough to Deadshot to get more information, he claimed he didn’t know what he was talking about and we found out that, like Lyla, he’d had his memories erased. Even so, Dig thinks if he can figure out a
way to get Lawton out of ARGUS and have his implant removed that we can figure out how to get his memories back so he can lead him to the information he needs.”

“What happened to Lyla?” Tim asked.

Felicity shrugged, “Took off. She broke up with Diggle because she needed to get away and…I don’t know,” she said sadly. “He was pretty broken up about it for a long time but I think he’s doing better now. In the beginning, though, it was rough. He blamed himself because if he hadn’t pursued the link between Hive and Waller she never would have gotten hurt in the first place.”

“Waller,” Barbara said with a note of pure loathing. “One of these days I’m going to pop that bitch a good one, swear to God.”

“Get in line,” Tim said wryly. “Tell you what; after we get a handle on this whole Ra’s and Stellmoor thing, we’ll help your buddy take down Waller. Trust me, it’ll be a pleasure.”

“Seconded,” Barbara said with a snort.

“Speaking of the Isabel thing, there might be some bleed-over between ARGUS and Stellmoor so keep an eye on that,” she warned them.

“Duly noted,” Barbara said. “Tim, you’re up.”

“Huh?” Tim said, his mouth full of cooling ramen. “Oh,” he swallowed and wiped his mouth with his napkin before clearing his throat. “Okay, what else do I need to know about Roy that you might have left out?”

“Watch for wild punches, he’s a righty, and keep your pants up around Thea because they are technically on the outs but they’ve still got this whole Rich Girl meets Bad Boy love angst thing going and she’s matured a lot but she might be tempted to use you to get a rise out of him. She also runs the club upstairs so try not to get noticed too much even though she’s in the loop.”

“Good to know,” Tim said.

“Do you guys have any advice for me before you leave?” She asked.

“Nope,” Barbara said, popping her ’p’.

“Nothing? Nothing at all?” She raised an eyebrow at that.

Barbara shook her head, “There’s nothing about Bruce I can tell you that you don’t already know. You already have the long and short on all the good, bad, and ugly that is tall, dark, and grim. Welcome to the Batcave.”

“Abandon hope all ye who enter here,” Felicity muttered.

“Well Baby-Girl, in the words of Mark Twain, ‘Go to Heaven for the climate, Hell for the company,’” she said with a grin.

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When Felicity got home that evening there was a heavy weight in her chest. Barbara and Tim were both packed and ready to head to Starling the day after the next, ready to fill her empty spot on Team Arrow, and she didn’t know how to feel about that. She was grateful, of course. Barbara and Tim were more than just backup; they were both experienced field operators, highly skilled and combat
proven. Even in a wheelchair Barbara Gordon could take down a foe with lethal efficiency. Oliver, Diggle, and Roy would go from a two man crew and a raw recruit to a five man team. She was glad they were getting the manpower they needed but…

Felicity rolled over in her bed and rubbed her cheek into her pillow. She glanced at the clock on her bedside table and sighed. It was so late. Even with the three hour time difference it would still be the middle of the night in Starling City. They could be in the field or in bed…she shouldn’t call.

Not before she spoke to Sara first, then she’d talk to Oliver.

Felicity reached for her cell and dialed.

Sara picked up right away. “Hey Cutie, everything okay?”

“I’m good; where are you?”

“Somewhere over the Atlantic right now; why? Do you need me in Starling?”

“I’m, um, I’m not in Starling anymore,” she said slowly.

“Why not? What happened?” She could hear the genuine concern in the other woman’s voice.

“It’s a long story,” she said at last. “I’m staying with my family in Gotham but I have some time free. I’d love to meet you someplace and I can come to you. Where are you planning to be for the next few days?”

“No place, really,” she said. “In fact I can be in Gotham in,” she heard her mutter something and another voice answered in the background. “A couple of hours. The people I work for keep corporate digs all over the place so I can meet you tomorrow after I get some shut eye, say for lunch maybe?”

Felicity immediately thought of the diner Jake had taken her to, “Do you know where Slim’s Starlight Diner is in Midtown?”

“The one with the chrome and the waitresses in poodle skirts? Yeah.”

“I can meet you there at, say, noon? Or is that too early for you?”

“No, that’s perfect,” she said easily. “Hey, did something happen between you and Oliver? Did you guys have a fight or something?”

“Or something,” she muttered then sighed, “Look, I want to tell you everything but I’d rather do it in person.”

“Got it. Just…is something wrong?”

“Not…no.”

“Not no?” Sara repeated with a hint of amusement in her tone. “Double negative there, Cutie. ‘Not no’ means ‘yes’.”

“Let’s just say that I’m really looking forward to seeing you tomorrow,” she said sincerely.

“Okay, I’m looking forward to seeing you, too,” She paused again, “Hey Felicity?”

“Yeah?”
“Do yourself a favor and call Ollie.”

“That’s not a very—” she began.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on but I know that if you’re in Gotham it can’t be good. Just call him and we’ll talk tomorrow, okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll… I’ll call after we hang up,” she agreed quietly.

“Bye girl, get some sleep. I’m going to try to catch a couple of hours before we land myself.”

“Night,” Felicity told her before hanging up.

She thought back to her conversation with Barbara and Tim and all the things she’d said about Oliver and his tendency to revisit relationships that never seemed to work. Wasn’t that what she was doing every time she allowed herself to think about going home? She and Oliver couldn’t be together and yet she was consumed with guilt for sleeping with Bruce. It felt like she was cheating on Oliver because, even though they weren’t together, it felt like they hadn’t ended it either.

She’d been so scathing in her remarks about Laurel. Oh, she tried playing it off like she was full of sympathy for the other woman, but the truth was that she was being a complete and utter bitch. She hated it when women allowed themselves to behave so nasty and bitter toward one another and yet that was what she was allowing herself to become; a nasty embittered bitch who couldn’t let go of the past. Five years from now where would she be? Would she have moved on with a life of her own or would she be like Laurel, drawn into a relationship so toxic that it ended in a nervous breakdown? No, either she was with Oliver or Bruce, but she couldn’t be with both of them. She couldn’t do the back and forth thing, she couldn’t live with the guilt. She’d seen how that had worked for Sara, Laurel, and Oliver and she didn’t want to repeat their mistakes.

They needed to talk, to get everything out in the open once and for all. The last time they spoke he’d been angry and pushed her away but she knew he had acted out of fear for her safety more than anything else. She’s known him long enough to know that by now he was probably beating himself up for having spoken to her like that. She needed to hear him say they were done in a way that she could let him go and he needed her to forgive him. She didn’t want to live her life knowing that she had added to the overwhelming guilt Oliver carried on his shoulders. No matter how this turned out, a part of her would always love him and she couldn’t do that to either of them.

She dialed Oliver’s number before she could talk herself out of it. After all, their last phone call didn’t exactly go well but that didn’t stop her fingers from hitting the familiar numbers.

“Felicity.” Oliver’s voice held a slight chill but, even so, she felt her heart beat a little faster at the sound of her name on his lips.

“Hi,” she said quietly.

“You shouldn’t be calling me; it’s not safe,” he told her. “Not unless something… has anything happened? Are you alright?” His tone going from irritation to concern.

“No, no, I’m fine; I just…” she paused, her breath stilling in her chest.

“What is it?” He asked, sounding even more irritated than before. “I really don’t have time to—”

“I’m sorry, I probably shouldn’t have called,” she said, swallowing down her pain and tears.

“I can’t—we can’t do this, Felicity,” he told her wearily.
“I know,” she breathed.

“What do you want?”

“I want to talk,” she said quietly.

“No.” It was said with such bitter finality that she had to bite her bottom lip to hold in her noise of pain. It didn’t matter, he heard it anyway. “Felicity, stop it! Just…stop,” he took a deep breath.

“Don’t make this any harder than it has to be. Start trying to make a life there, go out, get a job, meet someone; find a way to be happy. You have to move on; the team has to move on without you.”

“Oliver—” Even she had to cringe as she heard the pleading note in her tone.

“Don’t; just don’t.” She could hear the pain she felt reflected in his voice. “We’re done—you’re done here. I’m sorry but…don’t call me again unless…just don’t call me again.”

“Wait, Oliver—!”

“What?” He bit out.

“What?” He bit out.

“I miss you,” she told him.

She heard him make a pained noise and when he spoke she could hear the strain in his voice, “Don’t do this to me, Felicity. I can’t—”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered sniffing. “You were right; that morning when you left and…I lied when I said I didn’t care. I was…I was hurt and angry and I didn’t mean…I just needed to tell you that I’m sorry for how I left things. Please Oliver? Just—I just need you to know,” she swallowed and gritted her teeth as she fought back her tears, “If this really is goodbye then I need you to know that I’m sorry.”

“You’re killing me right now.” He paused, “I know,” he said quietly. “I know you’re sorry; I’m sorry, too, and I forgive you. That’s not what this is about though. God, why…?” He took a deep breath then exhaled and she could hear the draw of it against the receiver. “I didn’t want to have to hurt you but I…you’re making this impossible.”

“If you don’t want to hurt me, then don’t;” she told him. “Oliver, I know you told me to move on and I’m trying, I am, but I can’t move on until I put what this is between us to rights, even if that means saying goodbye. And if…if you tell me that you don’t want that, that if you don’t want to say goodbye, then I swear to you that I will find a way to come home even if that means that we just go back to being friends because…” she sniffled, “I miss my friend. You’re my best friend, Oliver.”

“Damn it,” he muttered and she could hear the catch in his voice. There was a sound on the other end of the phone like cloth rubbing against the receiver and she imagined for a moment him dropping the phone to his chest as he gathered his wits about him. “I really…I really hate that I spoke to you the way I did the other day. It killed me to do it but you called and said…said we were your home,” he told her and she could hear the tears forming in his throat. “Goddamn you, I really hate that you said that to me because I’m trying my best here and you’re making this so fucking hard on me.” He paused and she could hear him clear his throat. “You always did see more of me than anyone else, so why is it you can’t see this? Why can’t you see what I’m trying to tell you now?”

“Just…just tell me then,” she said quietly. “It’s okay this time; I promise this time I’ll listen and I won’t interrupt anymore but I just need to hear it. If you really want me to move on, really move on, then I need to hear it.”
“I can’t love you,” he told her simply. “I can’t be in love with you. I wish I could but I can’t. I want to; God, I want to tell you that more than anything. I want to say to hell with it and just tell you to come home to me, but this thing, whatever it is between us, it’s destructive and dangerous and it’s going to get you killed and I can’t take your death on my conscience. The truth is that I should have sent you away six months ago. That day…” he paused. “The island, everything since; nothing else compares to the terror I felt that day. The only thing that came close to it was when he had his sword pressed to your neck a year before that. At least then I was able to distract him, talk him down, but this was different. Before he was just focused on me, this time he was so focused on you that there was nothing I could do.”

He took a breath, “Slade was standing over me and I was bleeding out. I remember thinking that we were all dead; me, Dig, Sara, Roy. We were all dead or dying but you were safe and that was enough and then…” He cleared his throat again. “I don’t know what happened, it’s like my mind blanked out for a minute. I don’t know if I lost consciousness or what, but one minute it was just me and Slade and then you were there in front of me. It was like you appeared out of thin air or something, and Slade was just staring at you. You were talking and I couldn’t move; I couldn’t get up. I kept trying to get to you, I tried dragging myself over to you, I was screaming your name, but you wouldn’t look at me, you wouldn’t budge even when he took stepped towards you and started…” He paused, the words seemingly caught in his throat.

“He put his hands on you and started talking about…God, I wanted to fucking kill him. I wanted to kill him for touching you, for talking to you like that. It was like watching my mother die all over again but worse. I knew he was going to…” again, he paused. “You went with him, and I saw the detonator in your pocket. I couldn’t even hear what Slade was telling you over the rain and my own heartbeat and then you disappeared behind the truck. I remember screaming your name over and over and then the explosion—” He made a pained noise. “I don’t know how you survived the blast. You shouldn’t have; at the very least, you should have been hit by shrapnel, concussive injuries, something, but you didn’t even have a scratch. All of us were affected by the explosion; Lance was the closest one to you and he was several hundred yards away. He was hiding behind a cover, had on a vest, and still he took on injuries, but you were right there, in the center of the blast radius, and nothing. I woke up and there you were; a little dirty, a little pale, but otherwise fine. I thought you were a ghost or a hallucination but then you put your hand on my cheek and I could feel you. I should have sent you home to your family then but I was so fucking grateful to still have you that I didn’t want to let you go even though I knew it was a mistake. That’s…that’s what our night was, Felicity; it was me trying to keep you because you were trying to sacrifice yourself all over again for me and I couldn’t stand to see you do it. I saw you slipping away from me and I just wanted to hold on. I reached out for you because I’m a selfish prick and I needed to make love to you in order to prove to myself that you were still alive; still mine. That said, even though I know our night together was a mistake, I don’t regret it. I can…I can still remember how you taste.”

Her heart beat out of rhythm as she heard his words and she squeezed her lips together tightly so he wouldn’t hear her tears.

“After you went to sleep that night, I shut my eyes and listened to you breathe next to me and I kept thinking of all the possibilities in front of us. I wrapped my arms around you and thought, ‘At last; this is how it’s going to be for the rest of my life. This is my moment of happiness.’ I tried to think of all the nights where you’d share my bed, mornings where I’d wake up to your smile. I thought about things I had no business thinking about, like…like building a life together, watching you walk down the aisle towards me, making a home for Connor to visit and holding our children for the first time, growing old with you; but in the end I realized that none of those things could ever happen. It was a dream.”

She could hear as he took a deep shuddering breath, “This thing I’m doing, the Arrow, it has a
limited run at best. I’m surprised I’ve lived this long and I never, ever thought we’d survive Slade. That night when we left you in the Lair; that was supposed to be goodbye. You weren’t supposed to be there but you came anyway. You faced down Slade for me, you faced Batman because you didn’t want to see me get hurt, you…” He took a breath, “you slept with me that night because you loved me. I didn’t let you say it then, just like I don’t want you to say it now, because this, us… I can’t keep hurting you. I can’t be what destroys you, Felicity. Being the Arrow ends in one of two ways; death or prison. All I can do is keep fighting for as long as I can until one or the other catches up to me, that’s all I can do. How can I have a life with you while that’s hanging over our heads? How can I love you and let you love me if it means getting you killed or leaving you to pick up the pieces when I’m gone?”

“Shouldn’t that be my choice?” Felicity asked painfully. “Shouldn’t I have the right to take that risk with you?”

“No,” he told her, “because I already know what you’d choose and it would be a mistake. I can’t be a boyfriend; not and be the Arrow. I can’t be a husband, I can’t have children with you, I can never build a life with you because eventually the Arrow, his enemies, his deeds will catch up to me and I can’t risk having that destroy the people I love. You’d sacrifice your life, your happiness, the possibilities of creating a home and a family of your own in a heartbeat and I can’t keep letting you do that to yourself so I have to let you go. I have to push you away in order to save you so I can do what I need to do to be the Arrow. I’m sorry, but you can’t ever come home again. I might not have the strength to send you away twice and if you got hurt…I wouldn’t survive it. You’d be my death sentence, Felicity; I’m sorry.”

Silent tears poured over her cheeks and she nodded silently even though he couldn’t see it. “Okay,” she said at last. “That’s all I wanted; just the truth. Thank you.”

“How are things going with Wayne?”

She chuckled through her tears and grabbed a tissue off her nightstand to wipe her nose, “Hate you? Never,” she said with a broken sob. “You’re still my best friend, remember?”

“You’re…you’re still mine, too.”

“Guess that means we’re pretty screwed, huh?” She said with a sniffle.

“Yeah, guess it does,” he said with a chuckle, his voice congested with tears of his own. He took another deep breath and cleared his throat again, his voice growing stronger, “How are things going with Wayne?”

Her heart clenched, “I don’t…I don’t know.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Is he...are you together now?”

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “He, uh, said something to me today and I think he might want that but…”

“I can’t…” He stopped.

“I know,” she said quietly.

“I hate that it’s him,” Oliver said quietly. “I hate that it has to be anyone else but me, but if he’s what makes you happy then you should be with him,” he said softly. “I don’t like the guy and I probably never will, but I want you to be happy. You deserve to be loved, Felicity. You deserve to feel someone’s arms around you…I just wish they could be mine.”
She gave a short bark of laughter as the tears rolled down her cheeks, “I don’t think any of us are allowed to be happy, Oliver,” she told him.

“That’s not true,” he said told her. “Maybe not for all of us, but you deserve to be happy. You have to be happy.”

“And why do I have to be happy, Oliver? Why?” She asked, her voice cracking slightly.

“You have to be happy for me; because the idea of you being happy is the only thing that’s keeping me going right now, sweetheart.”

“If that was true then I’d still be in Starling with you and Dig where I was happy!” She said with a sob before she could stop herself.

“You don’t think I wish you could be here?” He said, his voice tinged with anger though it wasn’t directed at her. “If I could, I’d hop a jet and drag you home myself, but I can’t. I just can’t, Baby,” he said brokenly. “God knows I want to, but I can’t. You have to move on; just please, for me, you have to move on so that I can start moving on. You have to stop calling me and try, please.”

“I don’t want to do this,” Felicity whispered brokenly. “I don’t want to move on.”

“I know.” He said, his voice cracking as well. “I don’t want that either but—” He made a rough sort of growl deep in his throat. “Fuck, this isn’t fair. None of this is fair!” He took a breath, “If I could, I would, but I can’t. And even if you were here and Isabel wasn’t a problem anymore, there’d still be the mission and everything else going against us. I couldn’t…I couldn’t make it work with Sara because of the mission, I couldn’t make it work with anyone, and as much as I’d like to think I could make it work with the two of us, I know…I don’t want you to hate me, Felicity, and I don’t want to lose you, but I just can’t.”

“I just need to know something before I let this go,” she told him. “Are you…are you angry about Bruce? If I decide to be with Bruce will you hate me?”

“I can’t say that I like the idea but I could never hate you,” he said quietly. “Do you want that? To be with him?”

“I don’t know if what I want matters anymore,” she said in a defeated tone.

“It matters,” Oliver said sincerely. “I meant what I said, Felicity; move on and be happy. You deserve to be happy,” he said just before he ended the call.

She sat on her bed and stared at down at her phone and all she could think about was how he hung up without telling her goodbye.
Chapter Twenty-Eight
She sat on her bed as she dressed feeling completely wrung out and emotionally exhausted. She didn’t bother with makeup or dressing up that day. It was Sara and she was the kind of person who preferred to stay dressed down and ready for action unless the occasion called for it and the last thing she wanted to do was flash labels at her given what they were going to be talking about. She decided to wear a pair of dark denim skinny jeans and a gray silk jersey long sleeved pullover. She pulled her hair back in its usual ponytail but decided to wear her contacts. She wanted to have nothing between them while they talked, not even the thick framed comfort of her glasses. It was important that Sara saw her just as it was for her to see the other woman’s reactions.

Talking to Oliver the night before had given her some closure but had also ripped her heart apart at
the same time. She was more confused than ever. She replayed his words over and over in her head until she was a wrung-out mess. He was clear on the fact that they couldn’t be together and she should give the thing with Bruce a shot, but he also all but said he loved her. Actually, what he said was ‘I can’t be in love with you’, which basically meant he was in love with her. And she…she was…

Fuck. The truth was that she was in love with Bruce just as much as she was in love with Oliver. It was sick and insane but it was the truth. As much as she had wanted to avoid it, she was a total Laurel right now. She called him wanting to get some closure but now she just felt raw. She had more history with Bruce but Oliver had always needed her more. He was always more tangible for some reason. Even though Oliver had always been a bit more out of reach in a lot of ways he had always felt more like hers. With Bruce there had almost been too much history whereas with Oliver there had been nothing but possibilities which is why his rejection had cut so much deeper than anything she’d ever felt before.

Her whole life she’d been Felicity Fox, daughter of Lucius and the other woman. Luke and Tam always assumed she didn’t go to all the activities and functions they had attended as kids because she wasn’t interested but, the real truth was, she didn’t go because she didn’t want them to have to defend her to their friends. She didn’t want them to grow resentful of her presence in their lives or have to justify her right to the name ‘Fox’. She always stayed with their father because he needed her there and because he never made her feel like she didn’t belong. Even then she always felt a bit overshadowed by the ghost of Evie. He clung to her because of her mother and sometimes, in her darkest thoughts, she wondered if he ever really saw her for who she was and not just as his last tangible connection to a woman who had lied to him throughout their entire marriage whether he knew it or not.

As a child she always worried that he’d leave her behind eventually because she wasn’t really his. Everyone was always saying she wasn’t really his daughter and part of her wondered if someday he’d realize that as well. She also felt some measure of guilt because Lucius’s first wife, Tanya, had always been so kind and loving towards her to the point of allowing her to call her ‘Mama T’ and treating her like one of her own. She could have chosen to reject her or ignore her entirely but she never did. She longed for a mother, fantasized about a life where they could be a regular family and not just a patchwork built out of odd weekends and holidays, only to come to the eventual conclusion that she was the reason for all of it. If she had not existed Tanya and Lucius would have been able to salvage their relationship and their family would have been made whole again.

She never told Lucius about that but she knew he sensed that there was something there. She always got very quiet whenever Tam and Luke went ‘home’ with Mama T. He always thought she was just lonely for children her own age and he’d offer to send her to camp or arrange playdates but she’d just smile and tell him she’d rather go to work with him or stay home with Peggy.

Felicity spent much of her early childhood sitting in the corner of Lucius’s office coloring or reading a book. She was so quiet and so well-behaved that most people never even noticed her after a while. In fact, she became so good at being quiet that Lucius and Mama T got into a rare fight over it. One night, unbeknownst to them, she overheard Lucius and Tanya arguing in low tones about how Tam and Luke had been so rambunctious and loud and how she was always so silent and still in comparison. She remembered Tanya urging Lucius to let her take her to one of the Foundation’s clinics and Lucius adamant that nothing was wrong; that’s when she learned the art of babbling. She’d smile and ramble a bit and they’d all relax and leave her alone, no one ever seeming to notice that although she always seemed to say a lot, in reality, she’d never really say anything at all.

She learned to hide in plain sight that way. As long as she pretended she was happy, her family was happy, so she hid. When people made cruel remarks or left her out she just pretended not to care.
She’d find Lucius and be happy for him because he needed her. When he expected her to go to parties and travel like Tam and Luke did with their friends she pretended not to want to go because she didn’t want to hurt him by admitting that she didn’t get invited to those parties and she never told her siblings about the cruel little asides their ‘friends’ made when they weren’t around. She just learned not to be there when they were or to fade so far in the background no one ever noticed she was there in the first place. If they did notice her, she’d just smile and ramble until they got bored enough to move on.

At home though, home was different; she had Lucius and she had Tam, Luke, Peggy, and even Mama T. It was enough for her; they were her world and if Evie’s ghost was a burden she had to bear then she could pretend for as long as she had to in order to keep them. Then, after Peggy told her the truth about her mother, she hid that from him because she wondered if he found out the truth…if he stopped loving Evie, would that mean he’d stop loving her as well?

When she was eighteen her world changed all because of that secret and yet no one ever noticed. By then she’d learned to hide far too well for anyone to see her pain. The feeling of displacement she’d always felt, the disconnect, increased a thousand fold. To everyone looking from the outside in she appeared to excel at everything; she was at the top of her class, wealthy, attractive, and living a perfect life. In truth she was beyond lost. She had no purpose, no direction. Her entire life felt like one huge lie and she had no one to talk to; no one who could understand what it was like to live a half-life.

Whenever Oliver or Sara would talk about their past, the sex, drug, and alcohol fueled haze of one party after the other, she would merely listen and nod without saying a word. They’d both get this look in their eyes when she just listened to them talk without offering any platitudes or looks heavy with pious judgment. It was like they couldn’t believe that she could be so accepting of their mistakes but that was because they had no idea just how close she came to becoming them once upon a time. How easy would it have been to lose herself in a bottle or in the bed of some random stranger? At her lowest point that could have been her.

When Luke left for Africa and she was all but done with MIT she would sit in her apartment alone, the silence almost deafening. How easy would it have been to sneak into one of the parties raging around the campus and lose herself for a few hours? After the incident in her freshman year she’d avoided Greek Row as much as possible (even though Sebastian had long since been expelled) but loneliness and boredom had inspired her to see what the big deal was. Within ten minutes she was in an ambulance because she’d made the mistake of eating a pot brownie laced with nuts. She’d made it a joke, even fudged the truth a little and claimed it happened her freshman year instead so they’d assume it was something she’d quickly gotten over, but the truth was that several students at that party had been expelled or put on academic suspension earning her the title of the Kraken of Greek Row since it was the second frat she’d managed to nearly destroy just from her presence alone. After that, and the ensuing crackdown by the administration when her father found out, she was pretty much persona non grata at MIT. Even some of the professors began treating her with a cold shoulder or were outright hostile toward her. Suddenly her work on LAIR and her article in Scientific American took a second place to the scandal she’d left in her wake and she was done. Luckily, she was past all her exams so the backlash was more social than academic but still; continuing at the University as a member of the faculty someday was definitely off her list of career opportunities. The damage was done.

She returned home after defending her thesis a shell of her former self. The weight of her secret married with her feelings of isolation weighed heavily upon her. Luke was gone, Tam was in Europe, and she could barely look her father in the eye. The job offers were coming in steadily after she published but still she felt lost. She was eighteen years old, just a few months shy of her nineteenth birthday, and she felt like her life was over already. She could see her future completely
mapped out plain as day; she’d take some job, get her own place, work hard, keep to herself, and go through the motions of having a real life but it would be a lie. She’d see her family on the odd holiday, send emails, and talk to them on the phone, but she’d just be babbling about everything and nothing at all the same as she always had. The idea of ever having a romantic relationship with another person never even occurred to her; not because she thought she was unattractive or because she had a lack of self-esteem, but because she just couldn’t see the point. Besides, she’d never developed any social skills and the idea of even trying to connect to another human being on any level of intimacy just seemed too exhausting. No one ever wanted to see beyond the façade and maintaining it took effort. It was just easier to put up the walls and be alone.

Then, just as she had pretty much resigned herself to a life of limitations, Bruce was asking about her article in Scientific American and everything clicked into place. She saw his secret plain as day, saw his pain just as raw and hidden as her own, and she knew she had a purpose. Even if her whole world fell apart as a result, she had a purpose.

Bruce became her safe haven because, for the first time in her life, she found a place where she belonged.

Even though he was the Bat and lived his life half in shadow, she understood him. No one ever got to see the real Bruce Wayne just like no one ever saw the real her. She’d learned a long time ago not to stand out. When you stand out people notice you and that invited more problems, more negativity. She learned to stay quiet, to blend into the background from a very early age. Bruce did that only instead of being quiet he was loud and visible but somehow just as hidden as she was. Where she used a smile and a string of babble, he used the playboy persona. As soon as she saw that, made that connection, she was gone; their age gap, his scars, the darkness within his heart, none of it mattered to her. He was a kindred spirit and she had finally made a human connection. She didn’t fall in love with the Bat, she fell in love with the man in the shadows. Unfortunately for her, the man in the shadows had been the Bat for so long he no longer thought of himself as a man at all.

She miscalculated and dropped her shields to let him in and he, in turn, did the same. For one lost weekend she finally understood what it meant to be touched and touch in return. It was like the fog lifted and everything began to make sense. Her world went from a dull haze to HD clarity in an instant.

Felicity stared down at her hands. They were good hands; small but with elegantly tapered fingers and well-manicured nails. She could type over 145 words a minute, break into almost any encrypted system, write code at the drop of a hat, and save lives with those hands. Still, how often do people get the chance to just touch another human being with any level of intimacy beyond a brisk handshake? Other than her immediate family she’d never touched anyone. Yes, she received the odd hug from friends of her father or one of his employees but it wasn’t the same as intimate contact. For one weekend she’d had that.

Not only could she say the words that had been trapped inside her heart for far too long but she could chase the feelings with touch. He allowed her to reach out to him in not just a sexual way but an intimate one. Her fingers had traced his cheek, smoothed the fine lines at the corners of his eyes, scraped against the morning stubble of his beard, wandered across the planes of his chest, and explored the textures of his bronzed skin. He, in turn, had introduced her to a world of sensations she had never known existed; the feel of his fingers as they tangled in her hair then slid down her sensitive neck causing her to break out in goosebumps, his lips and teeth tugging on her earlobe and causing her mind to explode in pleasure, the jolt that came when he ran his fingertips across the swell of her throat and the hollow of her collarbone, the simple feeling of his hand clasping hers as he pulled her onto his chest and closed his eyes. The sound of his breathing became the sweetest lullaby she had ever heard and, although she would never admit it to him now, she did dream of a life at his
With his heart beating a steady tattoo under her ear she dreamed of silly girlish things. Not of weddings or children, that was too much to ask for even in her wildest imagination; no, she dreamt of belonging to him and of him belonging to her in return. She wanted to crawl inside his chest and stay there. She imagined a life where she would always feel his arms around her, his heartbeat in time with hers, a place where she could exist in peace and contentment and she did for three nights and two days during one all too brief autumn weekend. She wasn’t afraid of guns or madmen, she wasn’t afraid of the darkness, she was afraid of being alone. With Bruce she didn’t feel alone...until she was.

She wanted to stay in that moment forever even though a part of her knew it couldn’t last. Even so, when his rejection finally came, it was as though she had been plunged into darkness once again. Her only solace had been her memories of that one moment in time. Nothing could ever take that away from her. She had touched and been touched in return and it was enough.

After the pain had lessened she’d turn on the television and watch as couples kissed and thought, ‘I remember what that felt like’. She’d walk down the street and see people holding hands and flex her own as she remembered the feel of large strong hands and rough calluses. She’d listen as the other techs gossiped and chatted, always keeping to the periphery with a soft smile as they talked of the most mundane aspects of their lives. They used such exotic words as they spoke: boyfriend, husband, kids, home.

Home; a place where you belonged, a place with no secrets and no fear. Home was where the walls came down and life happened. She started going out to estate sales and antique malls, scouring Craig’s List and EBay for the perfect little addition to the home she was creating for herself. She painted and built, she bought books on decorating and sewing; she was alone but maybe, just maybe, she could still have a home and it kept her mind off the loneliness for a little while. That lasted for a few months until the final pillow had been placed and the paint on the walls had set and then she sat back on her heels and realized…

…what good was home if there was no one to share it with.

She walked into QC that morning a little dimmer than she had been. She tossed the magazines in the trash and picked up her phone intending to get to work and then Oliver entered her life and the darkness began to lift once more. One look at that laptop and she was going to send him on his way, she really was, but…

It was fun and the cobwebs began to clear and then he smiled at her…

Still, she was determined to do things differently with him. No matter how much she wanted that human connection she could survive without it as long as she had the rest. She spent her days waiting for the next assignment then after he’d sweep out of her tiny office she’d laugh at the ridiculous excuses he’d come up with as she solved his problems one right after the other—but always with one eye on the Arrow and the other on herself, the mantra ‘I will not get involved’ playing in her mind. After a while it became almost like flirting and she responded to it but never let it get under her skin. She kept her distance even if she was skirting the edge. Again, it might not have been everything, but it was enough. Then Walter was kidnapped, Oliver was shot, and distance became harder to come by.

She didn’t have to hide when they were in the basement of Verdant; in that dark and dank space she could finally be herself. Even though she seemed to hide her past, the truth was that Oliver got to see more of her than anyone else ever had. She dyed her hair and changed her name but beyond that she was pure Felicity. For him she was herself; only he and Diggle ever saw it though. When they were alone she could be smart and funny and sassy and she never had to bear the burden of being Felicity.
Fox; she was simply Felicity Smoak, tech wizard and woman without a past. They didn’t seem to notice her darkness because, compared to their own, it seemed almost nonexistent. If she hid it wasn’t because she was trying to deceive them, not on purpose. It wasn’t about hiding her past from them; it was about creating a future with them.

She left Evie’s ghost in Starling City and it was all because of them and they never knew. They always wondered why she stayed with them; she could see that question in their eyes when things would get bad. Diggle would give her a supportive look every time another one of Oliver’s women would sweep in and treat her like she was somehow less and he, in response, would allow it. She’d catch the other man’s looks of well-intentioned pity and then his disbelief as she assured him that her feelings for Oliver weren’t romantic and that it was okay. He never believed her but it was true. She wasn’t as bothered by the thought of another woman capturing Oliver’s attention and affections as she was by the fact that when Oliver found a connection he tended to shut everything and everyone else out.

That part always scared her; the thought that she would become redundant and unnecessary, but she’d put her head down and dig in even harder every time. At her lowest point, when it felt like she was a ghost and they all seemed to look through her too focused on each other to even notice she was in the room, she endured. She put aside her pain and her need for that connection to be the tool they couldn’t do without even if it meant sacrificing her own feelings. She kept it about the mission even when it got personal. It was just like any other mask she’d learned to wear; put up another wall, shake it off, and keep going forward because they were worth it. Every time Oliver would go too far, ask too much, overstep some invisible boundary she’d see the fear in his eyes; the little shadow that she knew meant that he was waiting for her to leave but she never did. She could never leave because that basement was her home. It was more her home in many ways than this one was.

And now it was gone.

At times, yes, it could be frustrating playing the role of Felicity Smoak. Sometimes when Laurel, or Moira, or even Thea back before they had actually become friends seemed to look through her like she was a nothing little nobody she wondered that if they knew she was Felicity Fox, daughter of one of the richest and most successful businessmen in the world, would they treat her the same way? It seemed so easy at first to play at being the poor worker bee that didn’t touch the trust fund that rivaled Oliver’s. It had begun as a grand social experiment on her part; a way to prove to herself and the world that she was more than just the daughter of the social climbing husband stealer. She could become self-made like her father had been and, at first, she thought she had really done something, but she learned very quickly that she had been laboring under a hubris. She scrimped and saved and clipped coupons like a ‘normal’ person and shopped at outlet malls only to discover that the true sacrifice wasn’t the lack of money, it was the lack of privilege. Money in and of itself can buy you many things but it can’t buy respect. As Felicity Fox she’d had that, or at least the illusion of it. People could be unpleasant but their cruelty never got beyond a whisper or a left handed compliment when she had her father’s claim on her through the name ‘Fox’. Felicity Smoak though; she was a nobody. Finding out just how much she’d come to depend on her father’s name had been a shock.

She was taken aback when she’d discovered that truth about herself. Felicity had always shied away from the spotlight, she was always determined to make her own way, but in her weakest moments the questions would pour out of the darkness in her heart until she felt suffocated by them: Would Laurel have snidely referred to her as Oliver’s ‘secretary’, implying that she took his dictation on her knees, if she had known that she grew up in just as rarefied a world as Oliver? Would Moira have stared her down like a bug if she had been introduced to her by Lucius instead of Oliver? Would that woman have dared to dismiss her with haughty superiority if the Felicity who had confronted her had been more than just an employee? Would Thea have snapped ‘Who are you?’ when she brought
flowers to Walter’s hospital room if she had known that her stepfather had trained under Lucius and thought of her father as a mentor and friend?

And what about Walter? Had Oliver been correct; had her life been meaningless to a man she had risked her life for? Did he see her as Felicity Fox, daughter of his mentor? Felicity Smoak, loyal employee? Or was she just the daughter of the other woman and therefore expendable? As hurtful as all of that was, as long as Oliver saw her for who she really was, it was enough. The temptation was always there but he never seemed to need to know the details of her life in order to appreciate what she was capable of. That made hiding and enduring easier even when it seemed to cut to the bone some days.

At least, that’s how she used to think. Now she had to wonder.

If Oliver had known her as Felicity Fox would he have pushed her deep inside the shadows and pretended not to see her as he slept with one woman after the other? Or would he have pursued her then dumped her with the same casual cruelty he had been famous for before his experience on the island? He told her the past didn’t matter but it did. It mattered to him whether he admitted it or not. He told her that he had wanted her for a long time before they’d finally slept together but he only acted on those feelings after he found out who she was. Maybe the truth was that until she’d been revealed to be his social ‘equal’ he just didn’t think she was worth his attentions? Maybe as a tech girl she’d been beneath him but as an heiress with a trust fund she was fair game? Maybe she really was all too replaceable after all.

She shook her head. That wasn’t true, she knew that wasn’t true. That was just the darkness talking.

When Sara had come back from the ‘dead’ and joined the team and she saw how Oliver seemed to blossom around her she’d been devastated. It wasn’t that they were sexually involved, not really. She’d come to accept that Oliver would never see her as anything other than what she was a long time ago. What bothered her was the sudden realization that she didn’t really belong there; Sara did, she’d just been unknowingly keeping her seat warm. Dig and Oliver tried to reassure her that she was important but they thought she was merely jealous. They didn’t get it; they couldn’t understand that it wasn’t about some silly crush for her. It was about being alone again.

She liked Sara, even then, but in the beginning it was hard for her to accept the fact that the other woman could just step inside the life she had built and own it completely and without effort. She knew it wasn’t that easy, of course. Sara had just as much baggage as Oliver did; their darkness was one and the same. In her lowest moments she found herself even coveting that. Sara thought of herself as broken but she couldn’t see what Felicity saw: strength, resilience, intelligence, and sexual empowerment. Even as her affection toward the other woman grew so did her envy in many ways. Many a bottle of wine, and even a few bottles of tequila, had been emptied with the other woman telling Felicity about her trials and tribulations. Sara had become her mentor and she her sounding board. She would drink and listen as Sara talked about her past, her present, her family, her fears, and she absorbed it all in a mixture of empathy and envy. The empathy came from her understanding what it was like to feel just a touch out of step with the rest of her family. The envy….that was harder to explain.

She listened as Sara told her stories about the mistakes she’d made, the reputation she’d acquired in her adolescence as a ‘boyfriend predator’ and later as a party girl. She spoke of her bisexuality and the lovers she had left in her wake. She talked about the overwhelming guilt she felt for hurting her sister by sleeping with Oliver but that she couldn’t regret it either. She talked about becoming an assassin and the lives she had destroyed, one after the other. All that guilt, all that pain, and yet all she could see was the fact that Sara had actually lived while Felicity had merely existed; a shadow on the periphery, a fleeting image at the corner of your eye easily dismissed and then forgotten. Sara
was a constant reminder of the fact that Felicity had wasted so much of her life but she was also her inspiration to do more with what time she had left. Sara had given her so much, taught her so much, and in repayment she…

Felicity closed her eyes against the pained expression being reflected back at her from the vanity mirror. “I’m not doing this,” she muttered as she pulled on a thick pair of socks and reached for a short pair of studded cowboy boots. Whinging about the past was a waste of time. She wasn’t some teenage girl who Facebooked her depression with quotes about broken-winged doves; she was a grown woman and she would deal with this like an adult. She had to in order to make it through today.

She stared sadly down at her boots. They weren’t her usual style; they were an impulse buy but something about them had appealed to her. They were intentionally distressed with scuffs on the heels and toe and decorated with copper, silver, and black studs on the shaft of the boot with a large studded star design on the toe. They were funky and a little tacky but they looked cool with jeans and she never got to wear them in Starling City because it was always either too hot or she never had time to dress down enough to wear them.

Her entire existence for the last two years had been spent in pencil skirts playing Oliver’s Girl Wednesday but the first thing she thought about when she saw them on sale several months ago was how much Sara would like them. Maybe it was a sister thing, or maybe it’s just something she learned from living with Tam, but she had fallen into the habit of buying clothes and shoes knowing they’d wind up in someone else’s wardrobe eventually; the boots for example. Unlike Tam however, Sara actually had some moral objections to outright wardrobe theft so Felicity would often buy clothes for ‘herself’ then give them to her because she ‘changed her mind’. Sara never completely bought the lies but nine times out of ten she took the clothes anyway.

Sara and Laurel’s relationship had never been stellar and, although they had somewhat reconciled briefly after her return almost two years ago, it was far from warm and fuzzy. Again, the words ‘too much bad road’ came to mind. In the world of vigilantes relationships often burned hot and cold. With her and Sara it started out a bit tense and awkward but, after a couple of weeks when she finally decided to get her own head out of her ass, Felicity got with the program and started warming up to her. It helped that Sara actually treated her like more than just office furniture, especially after Felicity had taken a bullet for her. In a lot of ways Sara reminded her of Tam; they had the same joy for life although Sara’s had been dimmed by pain and experience. The odd nap on her couch turned into her regularly crashing at her place and, once they established they wore the same size, the friendship was set in stone. In the months that followed they became more than friends, more than teammates; they became sisters.

It sounded weird that she could consider a woman who had at one time been an assassin for the League akin to a sister, but she did. They had nothing in common really, other than Team Arrow and a similar body type, but she trusted her; she even loved her. Sara was the only person on Team Arrow she’d ever talked to about her family even though it was just the basics. Not only that but Sara had kept her confidences just as surely as Felicity had kept her own. They had a bond built on spilt blood, tequila, and the fact that they both wore a size six shoe. According to Tam it was basic girl law: A friend will help you move, a best friend will help you move the body, and a sister will pull the trigger for you. Add in the mix the possibility of doubling your wardrobe and you’re set for life.

She looked down at the boots again and glanced at her reflection in the mirror. Not bad, she decided at last. Plus they were low heeled and she could wear her thick wool socks so her toes didn’t freeze.

Gotham winter weather was getting really old really fast.
She pulled out the black zip up wool jacket and long wine-colored scarf she planned on wearing today and took them out with her as she headed to breakfast even though the last thing she wanted right now was food. The noise was nice though, she thought. She could already hear her family arguing around the table.

Hearing Peggy and her dad argue soothed her in the same way listening to the hollow metallic sounds of the eskrima sticks clacking together while Dig and Oliver sparred in the basement did. There was a rhythm and a life to it.

“Damn it, Peggy! It’s Saturday! I deserve a real breakfast on the weekends!”

Felicity looked down at her father’s plate with a frown after she hung her coat and scarf on the coat tree closest to the entrance to the TV lounge. “What is that?” There was some kind of white omelet with an off colored piece of cheese on top and two links of what kind of looked like oddly pale sausage along with his usual beige glob of unadorned oatmeal in a bowl next to his plate.

“Exactly!” Lucius crowed in triumph. “Even Baby knows that this isn’t right! I told you I wanted eggs and sausage for breakfast—the doctor even said I could have a decent breakfast every once in a while—and you give me this—this—what the hell is this?”


“Thanks Peggy!” Luke said with a grin as he began digging in.

“No, that’s breakfast!” Lucius practically shouted as he pointed accusingly at the towering platter of food in front of her brother. On his plate was a stack of fluffy whole wheat pancakes, several links of sausage, crispy bacon, a cheese omelet, and a steaming bowl of oatmeal with chunky pieces of raisins, dates, dried cranberries, brown sugar, and cinnamon. He already had a foamy mustache from the huge mug of hot cocoa he had been drinking.

Even Felicity had to admit that making her dad watch Luke eat all that was akin to torture, especially given how he was enthusiastically pouring warm maple syrup all over the entire thing.

“Do you want some breakfast, Baby?” Peggy asked her, ignoring her father.

“Just coffee,” Felicity said, sitting next to her brother. “I’m not really hungry.”

“Are you feeling alright?” Peggy asked, narrowing her eyes at her suspiciously. “You don’t look like your usual self today.”

“She probably took one look at this glop and it turned her stomach,” Lucius muttered as he tasted his eggs. “Ugh!” He dropped his fork with a clatter and pushed his plate away. “What kind of cheese is that? It tastes like plastic!”

“It’s tofu cheese; Tam told me all about it,” Peggy said, pointing to the various components of his breakfast. “The whole thing is vegan, which means it has no bad cholesterols in it. See? Tofu cheese, egg substitute, tofu sausage, and oatmeal.”

Lucius stared at his plate in horror. “That’s it; Tam is out of my will and you’re going to the damn nursing home.”

“Try it!” She snapped at him, swatting him with a dish cloth. “How do you know you don’t like it unless you eat it first?”

“It’s tofu! Of course I won’t like it!” He said stubbornly.
“Morning,” Luke garbled at her through a mouthful of pancakes.

“Morning,” she muttered back as she sipped the coffee Peggy handed her.

Peggy walked over to the counter and brought back a bright yellow box, “See; it says chicken-free eggs. No cholesterol, no gluten, no fat, no sugar—"

“No flavor!” He threw down his napkin. “Look here woman; there is no such thing as a chicken-free egg unless it’s laid by something other than a chicken! I don’t know what the hell a tofu is but I do know it doesn’t lay eggs!”

“You just shut up and eat!” Peggy ordered as she stomped away, muttering curses under her breath the whole time in Mandarin.

The Central Plains or Zhongyuan Mandarin Peggy spoke was slightly different from the more formal and standardized Beijing Mandarin Oliver was fluent in but hearing the soft curses, so similar to the ones he would mutter and spit whenever he was in a particularly bad mood just brought the memories back to the surface and she gazed into her cup morosely.

“What’s the matter, Baby? Peggy’s right, your color is off,” her dad said pulling her out of her depressing reverie.

“Nothing,” she said, stifling a yawn. “Just didn’t sleep very well, I guess.”

Peggy came up beside her and placed her hand across her forehead as she examined her tired eyes and sallow cheeks carefully. “I think you are getting sick. You should get back in the bed and I’ll bring you something for it.”

“I can’t,” Felicity told her. “I’m meeting a friend from Starling City for lunch today. Besides, I’m fine. Like I said I’m just a little tired.”

“Hmph!” Peggy crossed her arms stubbornly, “You shouldn’t go out in this weather if you are sick! You’ll catch the pneumonia.” She nodded firmly, “I’m calling Dr. Schwartz. He gave me his home number for emergencies.”

“I don’t need to go to the doctor,” she said wearily. “Besides, I already went yesterday.” As soon as the words left her mouth Felicity closed her eyes and prayed for a swift and painless death.

“You went to the doctor and you didn’t tell me?” Peggy asked in her Loud Voice.

“I just went to get a…B-12 shot,” Felicity told her quickly. “For energy since I’ve been a bit run down. By the way, Caity at Dr. Schwartz’s office told me to say hi.”

“You saw Dr. Schwartz? Without me?” Peggy asked sounding almost hurt.

“Actually I saw one of the other doctors at his medical practice and, anyway, it was a last minute thing,” she said quickly. “I promise if I still don’t feel well by Monday you can take me back, okay?”

“No! No one will be sick!” Peggy said, perking up. “We’re having my special chicken soup for dinner tonight. You bring that friend of yours and I’ll call Tam so she and that bad boy can eat too. He probably has all kinds of bad germs that need killing.”

“The soup with the garlic and the ginger?” Lucius asked quickly, his scowl disappearing in an instant.
Luke looked up eagerly, his mouth filled with maple syrup drenched decadence, “And you’ll make those little ginger snaps and spiced almond cookies?”

“Yes,” Peggy told him then pointed a withered finger in Lucius’s direction, “but no cookies for you. You can’t have any sugar; the doctor said.”

“Damn it, he said my sugar was borderline and that was months ago!” Lucius said angrily, the scowl now firmly back in place.

“Dr. Schwartz told me that being borderline diabetic is like being a little bit pregnant; there’s no such thing! Either you are or you aren’t!”

“I am so sick of hearing that man’s name every five minutes,” Lucius grumbled as he poked at his non-eggs. “You should just marry the man and move into his house if he’s such a paragon of medical knowledge!”

Peggy stopped suddenly and patted her hair thoughtfully. “Well, he is a widower…” She cleared her throat then smoothed her hands over her apron, “Who is this friend of yours, Baby? You should have him meet you here so I can cook you both lunch instead of eating bad restaurant food.”

“It’s not a him, it’s a her,” Felicity said quickly disarming Peggy before she launched into full Yenta mode. “Her name is Sara and I already made plans to meet her in Midtown but I’ll ask her if she wants to come to supper tonight, okay?”

“Sara?” Peggy asked, her eyes lighting up. “And this friend is your age?”

“A little older; she’s actually closer to Luke’s age.” As soon as she recognized the light in Peggy’s eyes she bit her lips and glanced over at her brother. Luckily he had on his ear buds and was rocking out to his iPod as he studiously ignored the usual breakfast antics between Peggy and their dad.

Oh well, she thought, better him than me.

“And is Sara married or does she have a boyfriend?” Peggy asked, pouring herself a cup of tea and sitting between Felicity and Luke.

It really was like watching a mongoose track a cobra, Felicity took a slow sip of her coffee as she watched her dad take advantage of Peggy’s inattentiveness to reach out and snatch a piece of bacon off Luke’s plate. Luke looked up at their dad with his mouth open to say something but Lucius gave him a dangerous glare and the other man closed his mouth with an almost audible pop.

“She’s not married and I don’t think she’s seeing anyone in particular,” Felicity answered her although she really felt horrible for throwing her brother under the bus like this.

Then again…alien irradiated lion centaur.

Eh, he could handle it.

“Good! Good!” Peggy reached over and snatched the ear buds out of Luke’s ears.

“Hey!” Luke protested only to wince as Peggy smacked him in the back of the head.

“Pay attention! Your sister is talking about her friend Sara who is coming to have dinner with us tonight!”

“So what does Sara do?” Peggy asked sweetly as she turned to Felicity once again.

“She, um, works for an international charity kind of like Luke,” Felicity said honestly.

Okay, honest adjacent. ‘Charity’, like ‘special project’, was mask-code for mission. After she figured that one out she couldn’t help but giggle every time she threw a quarter in the fundraiser jar at her corner bodega. It definitely put a new spin on telethons. Every time PBS had a fundraiser weekend she’d imagine Maggie Smith kicking ass in a cape then sitting down to afternoon tea afterwards.

“What kind of charity?” Luke asked, his attention suddenly fixed on his sister. So much so he missed the look of triumph on the elderly woman’s face next to him as she mistook his Bat-ness for curiosity about a potential love match.

“Mostly women’s issues, kids, stuff like that,” Felicity said vaguely. “She sometimes helps with Oliver’s missions…overseas.” She and Luke shared a significant look. She felt a little twinge of anxiety at revealing the Canary’s identity to her brother but it was Luke and he needed to know that if she was going to be in the company of a Mask today that it was a friendly or she’d risk having him follow her all day; or worse, alert the rest of the Bats.

Even if he was still a little ticked at Bruce she knew Luke well enough to know his protective instincts would always override everything else.


“Wait, what?” Luke’s focus suddenly switched back to Peggy.

“Is she Jewish?” Peggy asked ignoring him.

“Peggy, no!” Lucius said at the same time Luke began sputtering. “Luke is a grown man and he can meet a girl on his own! Besides, it doesn’t matter if she’s Jewish as long as they love each other.” He added in a way that he probably thought was helping but really, really didn’t help at all.

“That’s true,” Peggy said with a sage nod of her head. She turned to Felicity again, “Do you think she would convert?”

“I’m not getting married to anyone!” Luke burst out.

Waving a dismissive hand toward him Peggy asked, “Is she pretty?”

“I don’t care what she looks like; I refuse to get set up with some random friend of Felicity’s!” Luke said stubbornly.

“Gorgeous,” Felicity answered her without hesitation. “Petite, blonde, incredible figure—she could be a model if she wanted to.”

“I don’t—” Luke paused then turned to his sister, “Got a picture?”
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Sara walked into the diner just before noon dressed in her usual slim fitting jeans and black sweater; her black leather biker jacket a bit more worn than she last remembered but Sara’s smile was just as bright as it had always been. The jacket was a bit of a good luck charm and she wore it constantly despite the fact that she knew the woman had accrued a fairly decent wardrobe since more than half of it had been provided by Felicity herself.

Sara was almost as big a wardrobe thief as Tam although, again, not nearly as obnoxious about it.
“Hey Cutie,” Sara said, kissing her cheek briefly before slipping into the booth across from her. She snatched up a menu and scanned it quickly, “Have you ordered yet? I’m starving. All I’ve had to eat in the last twenty-four hours are airline pretzels and some suspect falafels.”

“I’m good with coffee; I’m not really all that hungry,” Felicity told her.

Sara slowly lowered her menu and looked at Felicity dubiously. She sighed and folded the menu, placing it on the table in front of her. “Okay, what’s going on? And since when aren’t you hungry? You eat more than anyone I know and yet you still weigh like two pounds. Spill.”

“I slept with Oliver,” Felicity said quickly then cringed. “Sorry, I wasn’t intending to just blurt that out but—“

“You and Ollie finally had sex?” Sara asked quickly, a smile playing around her lips.

“You’re not mad?” Felicity asked, surprised.

“Mad?” She snorted, “Hell no, you just made me fifty bucks! I had a bet with Roy that the two of you would get together after I left Starling and now the little bugger owes me. I might have to swing by and collect.”

Her jaw dropped, “How—?”

“Oh please,” Sara said, rolling her eyes. “There was so much UST between you and Oliver it was ridiculous. Even when Ollie and I were together I could tell something was there within five minutes of entering the Lair.” She picked up her menu again, “I don’t mind telling you that after you and he would get into one of your Loud Voice episodes where you would wind up calling him on his shit, I usually ended up with an orgasm that had your name written all over it.”

Felicity gaped at her, “What?”

Sara waved her hand dismissively, “Not like that…” She paused, “Well, no, actually I wouldn’t mind that but you’re straight so—anyway, I just meant that fighting with you always seemed to rev Ollie’s engine, if you know what I mean. For a while there I didn’t know whether to hate you or thank you. I was even a little worried that I was stepping on your toes by being with Oliver. Shades of Laurel and all that.” She frowned suddenly, “If you finally got Ollie to make his move then why the hell are you in Gotham and not Starling City?”

“Yeah, um, that’s a long story,” Felicity said licking her lips nervously. “I’ll tell you everything but first I need to ask you a few questions and I need you to tell me the absolute truth, okay?”

Sara’s gaze sharpened and she slowly put her menu down again. “Although I might not have always told you everything, I’ve never lied to you outright, Cutie. Shoot.”

“Did you tell the Orbital Organization about Oliver and the mission?”

Sara blinked in surprise, “No, they never even asked about him. How do you know about the OO?”

“Before I tell you that, I need to know how well you know a woman named Isabel Rochev.”

“I don’t,” Sara said with a frown. “Wait, isn’t that the bitch who keeps riding your ass at QC; the one you called the Trans-Siberian Tramp?”

“That’s the one,” Felicity nodded. “So you didn’t know that she was high up in the organization’s chain of command or that Stellmoor bankrolled their operation?”
“Stellmoor? No,” Sara’s mouth tightened. “Look, I would never compromise Oliver or the team, you should know that. I do work for the OO sometimes but as an independent operator. They send me out on a few missions, bankroll some of my operations, but I don’t really know much about their set up; plausible deniability and all that good shit. All I know is that they do good work.” Her face was open and her voice dropped to a confidential level, “Listen, I don’t know this Isabel person but the mission I just finished was an OO job. I was sent out with a team to Paris where we broke up a human trafficking ring. It was a coordinated effort by six different teams spanning three continents and we saved kids as young as six from being sold as sex slaves on the black market. I don’t know what’s going on but whatever else happens I do know that those kids are safe tonight because of what we did.” She sighed and sat back in her seat, “Now, why don’t you start talking and tell me what exactly has been going on with you and Oliver since I took off and what the Orbital Organization has to do with it.”

Their waitress stopped by at that moment and she and Sara quickly gave her their orders. Sara wound up ordering something called the ‘Kitchen Sink Burger with extra Sink’. It was so huge it took up an entire platter as an open-faced monstrosity that had to be eaten with a knife and fork and consisted of a pretzel bread sub roll with four thick patties of well-seasoned angus beef, six slices of cheddar, smoked provolone, Colby Jack, Swiss, fresh Mozzarella, and smoked gouda and then topped with just about every conceivable topping you could think of including their ‘World Famous’ smoked barbecue chili with beans, coleslaw, grilled onions, bacon, jalapenos, double-fried French fries, and then topped off with four huge onion rings.

It had to be at least 50,000 calories, 10,000 fat grams, a million carbs, and was the most obscene thing Felicity had ever seen in her entire life.

Luckily her appetite had returned once Sara had given her some of the answers she needed so she turned around and ordered the same thing but she made sure to get it with a diet coke as to assuage her food guilt.

As soon as the waitress left she began to tell her story, sparing few, if any, details and pausing only when their food got there. She didn’t see the point of holding back as Sara had told her early on into her rambling confession that she intended to go to Starling to offer her support to the team in the wake of her absence and also to assure Oliver that she had not betrayed them. After a moment’s debate she even told her about her relationship with Bruce and his identity as the Bat. After all, even if Dig or Oliver managed to keep his identity under wraps she’d eventually meet Tim and Barbara and figure it out for herself. Either that or Roy would blab it out the second she popped her head into the Lair. Besides, telling her established not just trust but friendship and she needed to keep Sara as an ally.

Also it nice to be able to shock her adventurous friend with tales of her own sexual exploits for once.

“Holy shit! You fucked Batman!” Sara hissed quietly. “Batman? And you didn’t tell me?”

“To be fair it isn’t that easy to work something like that into a conversation,” Felicity shrugged.

“Bullshit!” Sara snorted, “Sometime between that bottle of Patron and the Grey Goose we liberated from the bar when I was telling you about the time I had a foursome with Oliver and a couple of female exchange students from Sweden you could have worked in ‘By the way, Batman busted my cherry in his Batcave,’ and, I promise you, I would have paid attention.”

“Well, the whole thing’s a mess now,” Felicity said ruefully. “Oliver can’t be around me without turning into a maniac apparently, Bruce is an ass, Isabel has gone from being the Boss from Hell to the Handler from Hell, and I don’t know what I’m going to do about any of it. I mean, do I feel bad for sleeping with Bruce even though Oliver basically kicked me out of his life right after having sex
with me and basically gave us his blessing? Should I slink back to Starling with my tail between my legs or should I try this thing out with Bruce even though it has ‘mistake’ written all over it? Do I continue to see Jake or do I break it off because, yeah, we just had lunch one time so far and I made it clear that I wasn’t on the pull, but it’s still a little skeevy to introduce a guy to your family after you’ve had naked-funtimes up against a window by the man you’ve been lusting after since you thought Barney was the shit, right? And what about the Orbital Organization? So far they seem legit but I still have serious vibe ping-ling left and right and I think I should keep pursuing it but if I tell Oliver or Bruce they’ll put me under house arrest and storm the gates.” She sighed, “If they really are legit then I could do so much good in the world and, if they aren’t, then I’m the best shot we have to get the answers we need. I’d be on the inside, up close and personal. How do I turn that kind of opportunity down?”

“Wow, that was one full tilt ramble there, Cute-stuff,” Sara said looking impressed. “You didn’t even stop for air once that time. First things first: You should definitely take the job at the OO. Worst case scenario is that you uncover some dirt and then call in the troops to bust it up. Best case, you finally get to do what you do best and save lives using that huge brain of yours.” She gave her a reassuring smile, “I know the boys all think you’re this blonde ball of fluff but I know better and I’m on your side here. If you want me in Starling to touch base with Ollie and Dig then that’s where I’ll be but I’m going to check in with you every chance I get and as soon as your friends are settled I’m coming back to Gotham to spend some time in your new Orbital digs. I’m already under contract and I’ve been steadily taking more and more assignments from them, plus they obviously know that we’re connected so it shouldn’t raise too many red flags if I decide to stick around for a while as your back up.”

“What about Oliver though?” Felicity asked tentatively. “Can you keep this a secret from him? Because if he finds out—“

“Look, I’m not saying I agree with how you went in there with no back up and no exit strategy but I understand why you did what you did and I also get why you want to keep the testosterone patrol out of the loop for a while,” she said ruefully. “I won’t tell Oliver until I have to, but for now it’s just us chicks so relax, Cutie; I’m here now and I’ve got your back.”

Felicity took a deep breath, “Thanks. Until now I didn’t realize just how scared I was at the thought of doing this all on my own.”

“Yeah, well, that was stupid,” she said flatly. “As far as I’m concerned you should have called me the minute this shit started coming together.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” Felicity said quietly. “The truth is that I was ashamed of sleeping with Oliver when I knew things were still on and off with the two of you and I was afraid to tell you about it.”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” Sara reassured her then sighed. “Hey, I won’t lie to you and say it doesn’t sting a little. The truth is that part of me still hopes that someday Oliver and I will manage to get it together but, right now, we are both way too damaged to be in anything approaching a healthy relationship. Besides, Oliver is…” she made a frustrated noise, “He’s stuck. His whole life he’s been stuck in that house and in that life and he doesn’t know how to get unstuck and I, well, I’ve been running away for so long I don’t even know if I can stop. Together we’re just one big mess but with you he…you made him smile, Felicity.” She gave her a tender look. “I never made him smile the way you could just by walking in the room.”

“He doesn’t want me,” Felicity reminded her. “He said it was for my own good but he literally exiled me. He even told me I wasn’t allowed to return to Starling City. I honestly think he might have my picture posted at the border.”
“I never said he wasn’t an idiot,” she said disparagingly. “Besides, he practically ordered you to go be with Bruce so the last thing you should do is feel guilty. That’s bullshit and, if he ever did do that, he’d be a hypocrite! He may have changed since the island but he’s still the same guy who would talk about moving in with my sister while he had his hand buried in my crotch. I guarantee that if he felt guilty about cheating on Laurel it went away the second he saw a nice pair of tits jiggling in front of his face. I wasn’t the first girl he slept with when they were together—hell, I wasn’t even the last.” She gave her another assessing look. “What do you want? If it’s Oliver then you should just ignore his crap and hop the plane to Starling to hammer this out once and for all, but if it’s Bruce then you need to move on and make the most of it. Trust me, angsty love triangles aren’t all they’re cracked up to be.”

“It’s not that simple,” Felicity said morosely. She looked up, “Is it possible to love two people at the same time?”

“Yep,” Sara told her, “but you always wind up loving one of them just a little more or you find yourself drawn to the one who needs you just a little more than the other. Sometimes it’s a matter of choosing the person who chooses you, you know? Sometimes it simply comes down to self-preservation.”

“What do you mean?” She asked quietly.

She took a centering breath and Felicity could see an old and all too familiar pain in her eyes, “Sometimes, no matter how much you love someone, you come to a point where you realize that no matter how either of you feel they just aren’t a priority. They’re important, yes, but they aren’t as important as they should be. I loved Nyssa, I did, but I knew I needed to be with my family more. When I found out Slade was coming back after everyone I loved I had no choice. I know that’s not the same thing as loving two people but Nyssa had become my family. In some ways she was…she was home but you guys were my family, you know?” she paused, her brow furrowed in pain.

“I know what you mean,” Felicity said quietly. “I know you and I haven’t really talked about what happened when you left with Nyssa after the Blood Army thing or how she took it when you came back to help with Slade, but I wanted to tell you I’m sorry. I might not fully get it, but I could tell that you both really cared about each other.” She quirked a smile at her, “Nyssa was actually pretty nice to me when we met. I kind of liked her.”

“She liked you, too,” Sara said with a snort. “She said she appreciated your ‘light’, whatever that means. Before I left she even mentioned you specifically; did I tell you about that?”

“No,” she said furrowing her brow. “Should I be flattered or scared that a general in the League of Assassins remembered my name?”

“Flattered,” she said with a chuckle. “When I told her Slade was back and that I had to leave because Oliver felt like he might be targeting you specifically, she said that I should stay close to you; that you had obviously been ‘touched by the gods’ and if my journey led me to your side that I should accept my fate and act as your protector.”

“Wow,” she said, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise. “I had like a five word conversation with the woman; I had no idea I made that big of an impression. So I take it that your second break up wasn’t as traumatic as the first one? You didn’t say anything so I just assumed…”

“It was good,” she said. “Honestly, our last break up was very amicable compared to the first one. No kidnappings, no poison, just a kiss and a hug between friends. She even released me with her blessings and said that to serve as protector to Starling would be the same as showing my loyalty to Ra’s
“That was…nice of her,” Felicity said stunned.

“Nyssa was like that; she was mercurial at times, but she had a way of seeing inside of people. It was like she could see right into the heart of things. She knew I had to go so she released me. I mean, yeah, she had her faults but she was also brave, loyal, fearless; I’ve never loved anyone as much as I loved her, not even Ollie. She became my entire world but it was too much, she was too much. There was no wiggle room, no shades of grey; it was her or nothing and I can’t live like that. I tried; twice, it just didn’t work. My family needed me, the team needed me, so I left. Every day I think about going back to her. I don’t,” she said firmly, “and I won’t, but I want to some days. I don’t know if that’s love or some kind of remnant of an unhealthy addiction like a smoker who quit twenty years ago but still wakes up wanting a cigarette. I guess I miss the intimacy we shared,” she said wistfully. “It’s the little things I miss; the way she’d hold me or how we’d soak in the tub together after a hard day, laughing with her while we prepared dinner or just seeing her smile. Yeah, she was a deadly assassin who poisoned my sister and kidnapped my mom but she had her moments,” she said wryly but the pain was still there, just under the surface.

She knew that pain. For once she didn’t have to covet Sara’s; she had plenty of her own to spare.

“That’s just it; I don’t have that with either of them,” she told her, before adding, “Not that I want Bruce or Oliver to kidnap my dad but, anyway,” she shrugged. “The truth is that despite what you guys thought you saw, Oliver and I never shared any kind of intimacy until we did and that consisted of an aborted grope on a conference room table followed by a night of sex a few days later that ended with him giving me the same blow-off speech Bruce handed me. With Bruce it’s worse because sometimes I think it’s more than just sex but I don’t know if I can ever trust him enough again to find out. Besides, he’s pretty adamant about the whole ‘undefined relationship’ thing. I’m not saying I want to get married and have a bunch of kids someday but I’d like to know the possibility was there, you know? With Bruce it just feels like all give and no take and with Oliver it’s all take and no give.”

“Well, if it would help I could give Bats a test drive that way I could offer you an informed opinion,” Sara said with a naughty smirk. “After all, you slept with both of them; I figure I should get at least one good roll in the hay out of it.”

“Funny,” Felicity said flatly as she sipped her Diet Coke.

“Oh, do I detect a hint of someone being territorial?” Sara asked.

“I don’t know,” Felicity whined and pushed her plate away from her as she folded her arms and laid her head on the table. “This isn’t going to end well, is it?” She asked, her voice slightly muffled.

Sara reached out and stroked her hand over Felicity’s hair comfortably, “I don’t know, Cutie Patootie; it could go either way. I don’t know your Bat but I can tell you that Ollie’s definitely too broken for a picket fence life and he probably won’t get there for a while so if you stick with him it’s going to be a long time getting there. You might want to consider freezing your eggs kind of long, if you know what I mean. As for Juicy Brucie,” she sighed dreamily, “the thing you told me about with the office; that was hot. Of course, the thing in the car where he basically offered you the opportunity to be his on-call sex buddy proved he was a total ass…albeit a totally fuckable ass,” she winked. ”Are you sure I can’t take him out for just a little test drive?” She asked then added another naughty wink. “No need to be jealous, hot stuff; you could watch and then maybe engage in some audience participation.”

Felicity gave her a crooked smile and propped her head on her hand, “What are you going to do if one day I actually take you up on your offer?”
Sara arched an eyebrow and gave her a slow grin, “Oh, I have an entire list of things planned for that day, Cutie; don’t you worry.”

“You’re impossible,” she snorted.

“I have been told that before,” Sara said with a filthy grin. “Seriously, you should give the velvet underground a try. The best thing with girl on girl is that you don’t have to spend $49.99 plus tax afterwards.”

“That is a definite selling point I will admit,” she said dryly. She took another bite and moaned in appreciation. “Maybe it’s for the best that I’m doomed to be alone forever. I can eat all the chili and onions I want and never have to worry about death breath while kissing someone.”

“I’d still kiss you,” she told her as she took another bite of her own.

“You know, of all the women to sexually harass me lately, I like the way you do it the best,” Felicity told her sincerely.

She chuckled, “Tell you what, if Isabel hits on you while I’m in the room I’ll grab your ass and tell her you’re my bitch, okay?”

“That is, seriously, the nicest thing anyone has said to me in a long time,” she told her, laying a hand over her heart.

“Oh honey,” Sara said shaking her head, “you have been having a bad couple of weeks, haven’t you?”

“Try years,” Felicity said dropping her fork on her plate. “Wouldn’t it be great if I could wave a magic wand and get them to both date me at the same time?” She paused then added, “While simultaneously getting over their stupid vigilante man-pain angst and stop being total buttheads.”

“Oooh,” Sara breathed. “Better yet, get them to ‘date’ each other, too. I’d pay good money to sit in on that action. If you’re lucky it could end in a devil’s three-way and, boy howdy, talk about a good time had by all,” she said as she took another bite of the mess on her plate. “Oh man, I am stuffed.”

She looked at the remnants of her lunch. “I don’t think I’ll be able to eat for days after this but it was delicious. I’m definitely going to need a workout later if I’m ever going to fit in my leathers though.”

She looked at her plate as well, noting that although she had somehow eaten more than the other woman she could actually still go for some cheesecake. She shrugged mentally, “That reminds me, you’re invited to dinner tonight for some Chinese chicken penicillin and matchmaking.”

“Say what now?” Sara said, the fork laden with chili and fries paused halfway between the plate and her mouth.

“Remember me telling you about Peggy Ann?” Felicity reminded her.

“Your foster grandma, yeah,” she nodded.

“She told me to invite you for dinner tonight so she can set you up with my brother, Luke.”

“The one who works with kids in Africa?” Sara said wrinkling her nose a little. “I don’t know. I mean, I’m sure he’s a great guy and everything but an ex-assassin dating a guy running a foundation for former child soldiers in the Congo? I don’t think we’d have a whole lot in common.”
“You’d be surprised,” Felicity said dryly. “Besides, it’s a free meal and you’d be the only member of Team Arrow to get to meet my family, not counting Oliver because a business proposal isn’t the same thing as watching my dad and Peggy yell at each other over the dinner table.”

“Okay,” Sara said with a shrug. “What time do you want me to come over?”

“It’s the weekend so we tend to have dinner early so everybody can do other stuff. Peggy usually has mahjong with all the other yentas and my dad is constantly going to one fundraiser or another but he likes to eat first because he has about as much patience for tiny food as I do. I’d say around five or so?” She asked. “In fact, if you don’t have any plans I thought we could just hang out after. I met a guy who DJs at a reggae club if you want to check it out and blow off some steam.”

Her eyebrows shot up, “Sounds cool. I only brought a small duffle bag with me though. All I have is a few pairs of jeans and my leathers.”

“Come on,” Felicity said as she took a few bills out of her wallet and threw them on the table. “Hey, you don’t have to get that; I should at least pay half,” Sara objected.

“It’s my treat; besides, you may be an international woman of mystery but I have a trust fund,” Felicity pointed out archly. “Anyway, I stole the cash out of Bruce’s wallet so lunch was really on him.”

“True,” she conceded as she put her jacket back on. “Where are we going?” She asked as she followed her out of the diner.

“My place. Oliver and Bruce destroyed most of my clothes but I’m sure we can find you something. If not, we’ll grab Tam and go on a shopping spree. If you thought I was good at bargain hunting you should meet my sister.”

“Yeah, I had to sleep on your couch because you turned your guest room into a closet, remember? I don’t even think that’s possible,” Sara said wryly.

“Felicity Smoak; Bargain Ninja,” she deadpanned. “Hey, if we go shopping maybe we can find a nice sporting goods store or a gunsmith. I need to pick up a new cleaning kit and I’d really like to find a .41 short; you know, something I can keep tucked under an evening gown.”

“Yeah, Derringers are pretty cute. I have a double tap I can give you but it’s a .45; I even have a great thigh holster for it that pairs nicely with a garter belt.”

“Really? Yeah, thanks; a .45 is fine,” Felicity said with a happy grin. “That’s so sweet!”

“No problem. I would like to go shopping though; I need to pick up some more throwing knives and some ammo plus I really need to go shoe shopping. By the way, nice kicks,” Sara said, easing beside her and looking down at her boots as they headed down the sidewalk.

“Thanks,” Felicity said looking down. “They’re really comfortable but not my thing. I’m probably never going to get around to wearing them again but if you like them you can have them.”

“Yeah, definitely; besides, we both know you bought them for me in the first place,” Sara said.

“No, I didn’t,” Felicity said quickly.

“Bull crap, you’re constantly trying to turn me into your little paper doll. Not that I’m complaining,” Sara said with a smirk. “I hate to shop and with my schedule your closet is about as close as I get to
“Busted,” Felicity shrugged. “My only defense is that I come by it naturally. Tam has conditioned me to over shop. She’s already torn through my wardrobe to the point that I need to go shopping again before I’m down to pajamas and the clothes on my back.”

Sara looked at her curiously, “You said she has a one bedroom condo on the Upper West Side?”

“Yes.”

“Where does she put all of those clothes?” Sara asked in amazement.

She shook her head. “I have no idea. I’m pretty sure she eats them.” Felicity turned to her, “I meant to ask if you wanted to stay with us at my dad’s place? He wouldn’t mind and the penthouse has tons of room even with me and Luke there. I guarantee it’s nicer than a hotel room in Midtown.”

“Yeah, maybe, we’ll see how it goes,” she said taking her arm before her voice dropped into a more confidential whisper, “Stay calm and keep talking. We’re being followed.”

“How many?” Felicity asked, forcing her lips to curve in a bright smile just in case there were cameras or surveillance equipment pointed their way.

“Just one,” she said in a cheery tone. “He’s a big mother though.” Her eyes scanned the crowd. “Let’s not do this out in the open. We’re going to duck into the alley and then you just follow my lead, okay?”

“Got it,” Felicity breathed.

They walked arm and arm, Sara occasionally pointing to something or stopping to look at one of the buskers on the sidewalk before ducking into one of the alleys. They walked a bit until they were far enough from the crowd not to be immediately noticed. One second they were having a pleasant stroll and the next she was wheeling on their stalker in a fury of kicks and punches.

Felicity ducked into a shadowy alcove, reaching into her purse for her weapon, and peeked out to see their pursuer handily blocking all of the other woman’s punches and kicks one handed.

One—“Sara, stop! That’s my brother!”

“Wha--?” Sara asked, her attention broken for just a split second but it was just enough to give Luke the advantage.

He swept her legs out from under her and grabbed her, causing her to spin until her back was pressed hard against his chest, his cast-free arm across her throat. “Nice moves,” he growled against her ear before releasing her.

“You too,” Sara said a little breathlessly as she moved slowly out of his reach. She stepped back, her eyes trailing down his form before the corners of her lips quirked upwards in a saucy grin. “Not something I expected from a school teacher or are Wing Chun and Aikido a part of the curriculum down in the Congo?”

“Sometimes,” Luke said in a deep voice that made Felicity want to give the two of them a lot of privacy while she washed her brain out with bleach.

Instead she just sighed and made introductions, “Luke, this is my friend Sara. She’s also known in the mask community as ‘Black Canary’. Sara, this is my brother Luke, aka WingBat.”
“Batwing,” Luke said with a scowl as he turned his attention to his sister. “And since when is it cool to go spouting out secret identities like that?”

“What’s a ‘Batwing’?” Sara asked with a frown. “I thought he ran a charity?”


“Seriously?” Sara asked dubiously. “That’s a thing?”

“Yeah, I didn’t believe it at first either,” Felicity said in sympathy.

“What the—” Luke glared at both of them. “I’m Batwing! It’s a real thing!”


Luke’s expression changed from anger to outrage and both women began to snicker.

“I’m just kidding,” Sara told him at last. “I have actually heard of Batwing, believe it or not. I just didn’t expect him to be Felicity’s brother or to engage in combat with him in an alley in the middle of Gotham.”

“You have?” Luke asked before schooling his features into a look of cool indifference. “I mean, of course you have and, uh, sorry about the whole pinning you thing.”

“No problem,” Sara said her eyes sweeping over his tall form once again. “It’s been a while since I had a good pinning.”

Ignoring her friend’s innuendo, Felicity spoke up, “Well, I’d never heard of him so you’re one up on me. I didn’t even know about Luke’s Bat-thing until a few days ago.”

“Well, that makes me feel a little better at least, but seriously; what is it with you and masks?” She asked. “Ollie, Bruce, and now your brother?”

“You tell me and we’ll both find out,” Felicity said with a wry expression.

“I’m still here,” Luke said, waving his good arm to get their attention.

“Like I could ever forget about you, handsome. After all, it’s not every day that a girl finds herself literally swept off her feet only to fall into the arms of an honest to goodness heroic bit of hunkishness like yourself,” Sara said looking at Luke’s bandaged arm curiously. “How’d you break the batwing anyway?”


“No, seriously; how’d you break your arm?” She repeated.


“No shit?” Sara said, looking from one to the other with raised eyebrows. “Wow, and I thought the Sewer King was a pot full of crazy.”


“Speaking of crap excuses; why are you following me?” Felicity asked, walking up so she could
thump him on the edge of his ear.

“Ow! Damn it!” He yelped, clutching at his ear protectively. “I was trying to make sure you were okay! Next time I won’t even bother!”

“That’s so sweet!” Sara said with a flirty grin as she sidled up to him.

“Yeah?” Luke’s eyes locked onto the deep ‘V’ of Sara’s sweater before grinning back at her. “Well, she is my little sister after all.”

“Hmm,” Sara practically purred as she ran her hand up Luke’s heavily muscled arm. “You know, Felicity invited me over to your dad’s house for dinner tonight. Maybe we’ll see you there.”

“Definitely,” Luke said, flashing his pearly whites. “And maybe later you and I can hang out; maybe talk some shop?”

“Always good to hear from a fellow mask,” Sara said, returning his toothy grin.

“Should I just leave you two alone so you can get a room someplace?” Felicity asked sarcastically.

“I already have a room,” Sara said, not taking her eyes off of Luke. “A nice one with a king-sized bed.”

“Maybe you can show it to me sometime,” Luke said with an interested glint in his eye.

“Ew,” Felicity breathed.

Luke threw his sister an irritated look but Sara just smiled. “Your sister invited me to a club later tonight; feel like joining us?” She asked. “You could…keep an eye on us and make sure we don’t get into any trouble if you aren’t busy.”

“Keeping an eye on you sounds like a good idea. After all, a guy can’t be too careful when it comes to his little sister’s safety,” Luke said huskily, patently ignoring Felicity who was rolling her eyes at him. “For all I know you could be a bad influence.”

“The worst,” Sara said with a teasing glint in her eye. “And I’m way overdue for a good spanking.”

Luke’s jaw practically hit the floor before he got it together again. In a suave tone he puffed out his chest and said, “I’m getting the pins out later this afternoon so it would be nice to give my arm a workout.”

“And who knows, maybe we’ll get to work out a few of your other parts while we’re at it,” Sara said in sensual challenge.

“I’m out of here,” Felicity said, turning on her heel and heading out of the alley. She waved behind her, “You two have fun and make sure not to give me any of the details.”

“So Sara, what do your parents do for a living?” Lucius asked reaching for the crackers at the center of the table.

The entire family was seated around the large kitchen table eating bowls of Peggy Ann’s miracle cure soup. They had a formal dining room but rarely used it, preferring the intimate seating around the butcher block table in the breakfast nook. Tam had come to dinner as well although Tim was conspicuously silent as he sat next to Lucius, looking as though he’d rather be doing anything else,
up to and including giving the Joker a bikini wax.

“Well, my dad—“ Sara began.

“No crackers!” Peggy said, snatching the plate out of his reach and placing it between Sara and Luke who she made sure were sitting next to one another.

“Then at least let me have a sandwich!” Lucius scowled in her direction.

“What happened between Dad and Tim the other night anyway?” Felicity whispered.

“He won’t say but every time I ask he gets this scared look in his eyes and finds a reason to leave the condo,” Tam snickered. “I think Dad is trying to get him to make an honest woman out of me or something.”

“Well, if he asked would you say yes?”

Tam seemed to mull that over, “Eh, probably, but can you really see Tim as a husband right now? Please. And even if I did say yes it would be a long engagement, I’m not ready to be spitting out little Fox-Drake-Wayne Juniors.” She paused, “Damn, that’s a long last name. Yeah, no, no hyphenating for me, that’s for sure.”

“You eat the soup as it is!” Peggy was lecturing their father. “Always with the more salt, more sugar! I should let you have all you want and then you’ll be sorry!”

“Damn it, Peggy, all I’m asking for is a sandwich and some saltines,” Lucius grumbled. “A cracker won’t kill me, woman! A man should be able to enjoy a meal in his own home without everything being an argument.”

“Don’t you argue with me,” Peggy told him. “I know what’s best! Dr. Schwartz even says so. I fixed the bad cholesterol, didn’t I?”

“The oatmeal fixed the bad cholesterol along with the fact that I started using the treadmill again,” he said stubbornly.

“And who made you eat the oatmeal? And who made you stop eating the bad restaurant food and start taking bagged lunches to work?” Peggy threw back. “I keep this family healthy. All of you would be sick if not for me. Look at Luke; he leaves home for Africa and comes back with a broken arm! If I hadn’t taken him to the doctor who knows what would have happened; his arm might have fallen off if not for me and now it’s practically all better.”

“Um, I already went to the doctor before I came home,” Luke spoke up between mouthfuls of grilled cheese.

“You shut up,” Peggy told him. “African witchdoctors don’t count! And Baby; look at Baby! The doctor gave her a shot and now she’s all better. If she hadn’t listened to me she’d have pneumonia by now.” She harrumphed. “Eat the soup, no crackers for you. I have to go check my cookies. And stop arguing with me in front of Baby’s friend!” She offered the younger woman a beatific smile, “Are you enjoying the soup, dear?”

“Yes ma’am, it’s delicious,” Sara said with an amused grin.

“Do you think it needs more salt?” Peggy asked sweetly.

“No ma’am, it’s perfect,” Sara told her.
“See?” Peggy told him gruffly.

“I like the soup, too,” Tim spoke up from beside Lucius.

“Shut up, Tim,” Lucius ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Tim said quickly, his attention going back to his plate of sandwiches.

“Excuse the rudeness of certain members of our family…and guests,” Peggy said giving Lucius and Tim a scathing look before turning back towards Sara. “Now, if you’ll excuse me I made my special cookies just for you.”

“Thank you, that sounds lovely; I would love to try some of your cookies, Mrs. Hu,” Sara said returning her smile with one of her own.

“See? ‘Some’ people have manners,” Peggy said tartly as she passed Lucius on the way to the kitchen.

“You’re not actually my mother you know,” Lucius called after her. “I’m a grown man, damn it!”

She spun on her heel, “You better be glad I’m not your mother! I’d have drowned you at birth and saved myself a lot of trouble! Nǐ mà lǎo shì rè wǒ…” she muttered under her breath as she headed towards the stove.

“You know you love me!” Lucius grinned at her making her grumble and stomp her feet as she threw open the oven door. “Luke,” he whispered to his son, “hand me a sandwich.”

“No way Dad, Peggy will get mad,” Luke said, pulling his plate that was stacked high with sandwiches closer.

“Boy, you give me a sandwich or I’ll break your other arm,” Lucius threatened in low tones.

“No way,” Luke shook his head.

“And here I thought you were supposed to be some kind of tough guy,” Sara said teasingly as she turned in his direction.

“Not when it comes to Peggy Ann, I’m not,” he said honestly.

Lucius grumbled unintelligibly turning towards Tim who had just taken one of the sandwiches off his own plate then snatched the other one before Peggy could catch him. The young man opened his mouth but shut it the second he caught the expression on the older man’s face, “You’re welcome,” he muttered under his breath.

“What was that?” Lucius asked with a dark look as he took an angry bite out of his pilfered grilled cheese.

“Nothing, sir,” Tim said quickly and handed him a cracker. “Saltine?”

“That’s what I thought,” Lucius said taking the offered cracker and putting it in his soup while hiding the sandwich in his napkin, one eye fixed on the elderly Chinese woman across the room. He looked back at Sara and fixed a pleasant smile upon his face, “I do hope you’ll excuse our bickering, Sara. We’re not usually like this.”

“You aren’t?” Tim asked with a frown, backtracking as soon as Lucius looked back at him. “I mean, no, no you aren’t, sir.”
“That’s okay,” Sara chuckled. “As far as I’m concerned it wouldn’t be a home cooked meal without a couple of good natured arguments thrown into the mix. Seriously, this is downright calm compared to dinner at our house.”

“In that case you’ll fit in fine,” Tim said ruefully then grinned brightly at his girlfriend’s father, “Because everyone is always so good natured here! Salt of the earth! Speaking of salt,” he said quietly handing Lucius the salt shaker under the table.

“Are you buttering me up, young man, or trying to kill me?” Lucius asked, taking the salt from him.

“Why? Did you want some butter?” He asked earnestly.

Tam waited until everyone was distracted and whispered, “Why’d you get a shot?”

“Depo-Provera,” Felicity said in a wry undertone. “Apparently I have lost the ability to remember to take a pill once a day.”

“$49.99 plus tax would add up after a while,” Tam mused. “Man, if I had to do that every single time…? Why this month alone…” She thought about it, “Yeah, that’s a lot.”

“Yeah, well, not that I’m planning on needing it but stuff happens,” she whispered back. “Especially when certain people are around. In addition to forgetting how to take a pill I’ve also forgotten how to keep my legs closed.”

“I better be hearing some details later,” Tam told her.

“Let’s just say that I’m lucky it was the window washer’s day off,” she said wryly.

“So Sara, you were saying about your parents?” Lucius asked in between taking bites out of the sandwich in his lap.

“Um, my mom teaches Greek and Medieval History at Central City University and my dad’s a detective with the SCPD,” she answered looking upon their antics with amusement.

“That’s wonderful,” Peggy said, bringing over a couple of platters of warm cookies, making sure to set the ginger cookies near Tam and Felicity and the spice cookies on the far end of the table closer to Luke and Sara. “Isn’t that—” she glared down at Lucius at then then narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “What is that on your face?”

Lucius cleared his throat and quickly wiped the smear of cheese off the corner of his mouth, “Now Peggy, we don’t want to argue in front of Baby’s friend, remember?”

“Humph!” Peggy gave him a dirty look, before turning a gentle smile back towards Sara. “So Baby says you work for a charity like Luke?”

“Yes ma’am,” Sara said with twinkling eyes, as she glanced at Felicity from across the table.

“Mask?” Tam whispered.

“Yep.”

“That’s lovely, just lovely,” Peggy said, sitting next to her. “And are your parents religious by any chance?”

“Peggy Ann,” Lucius said warningly. “Sara might not be comfortable with those sorts of questions.”
“No, it’s fine,” Sara told him. “My dad is Catholic, although he rarely attends mass, and my mom’s family is Anglican and Jewish on my grandfather’s side.”

“Jewish?” Peggy’s eyes lit up and practically everyone at the table with the exception of Sara groaned. “Baby, you didn’t tell us Sara was Jewish!”

“That’s because it never came up in conversation,” she said as Tam snickered into her napkin beside her.

“And Baby said you work with women and children?” Peggy asked her quickly. “You know, Luke likes children.”

Lucius cleared his throat, “Speaking of Baby, I ran into Bruce the other day and he mentioned he was redoing the penthouse so you could move in. How’s that going?”

Luke turned to her, a fierce expression on his face, “Wait, you’re---” He stopped and cleared his throat, “I mean, are you sure that’s a good idea? The Wayne Foundation Building is in a rough part of town.”

“Thanks for your concern Luke,” Felicity said, shooting her brother a dirty look, “but it’s not that bad. It’s closer to Midtown than the East End and the building is probably one of the safest in the city. Besides, I might not be taking the penthouse after all.”

“What? Why not?” Tim asked before noticing the dirty looks Luke was shooting at him, “Not that it’s any of my business…”

“Part of the reason Bruce offered me the penthouse was so that I could work for him as a consultant on some special projects he had going. I got a pretty nice job offer yesterday and I might not be available to do a whole lot of consultant work if I take it,” she hedged.

“Oh? What company?” Lucius asked curiously.

“Mine,” Sara spoke up quickly, an easy going smile upon her lips. “That’s the reason I’m in town actually. Felicity wanted to ask me if she should take it and I told her she’d be crazy not to.”

“A charity?” Lucius seemed to mull that over. “That’s wonderful, Baby.”

“Yeah, wonderful,” Luke said in a less than enthusiastic tone. “And what is the name of this charity; you never said.”

“The Orbital Organization,” Sara answered for her smoothly, something she was very grateful for because she totally blanked the minute Luke asked. The last thing she wanted to do is give Luke too many clues; Tim she’d have to work on later, “We work with victims of human trafficking and abuse.”

“Very admirable,” Lucius said approvingly. “And what would you be doing exactly?”

“I’d actually be working at one of the IT support facilities,” Felicity answered although not with the same level of confidence as Sara. “Running it actually; developing software to track down suspected human rights violations and assisting in, um…”

“We do a lot of work not only with victims but with law enforcement as well,” Sara said, coming in for the save. “Felicity’s knowledge of coding and software development would save countless lives and the Organization donates both manpower and tech to assist law enforcement agencies such as Interpol in taking down offenders much like the Wayne Foundation does.”
“And where is this job?” Peggy asked.

“Here in Gotham,” Felicity told her.


“Me neither,” Tim said with a frown pointed squarely at Felicity. “And it’s based here in Gotham?

“Yes,” Felicity said, trying to control the urge to kick her brother under the table and toss something at Tim’s head.

“You’re welcome to look it up,” Sara said smoothly. “We’re actually listed alongside ABC Nepal, Alliance, and the Wayne Foundation as one of the top anti-trafficking charities in the world.”

Tim slipped his phone out of his pocket and began a search as she spoke before finally raising his eyebrows. “I’ll be darned,” he said looking up with narrowed eyes. “I wonder why I’ve never heard of them? I thought the Wayne Foundation had ties to just about every major ‘charitable’ organization in the country.”

“They just opened an office here which is why they were looking for someone to run it,” Felicity said quickly. “They’re actually based out of Seattle but have facilities all over the world.” She hoped. She glanced over at Sara and caught her slight nod.

Good, that means their cover was based on Stellmoor’s.

“Well, that’s good,” Peggy said. “That means you can live here with us.”

“I said I might not take the penthouse but I still want my own place,” Felicity told her. “My hours are going to be pretty crazy and I wouldn’t want to have to come and go at all hours of the day and night.”

“Why not take Bruce up on his offer then?” Lucius asked curiously. “Even if you might not be able to do a lot of consulting I’m sure he wouldn’t mind you still taking the penthouse. After all, it’s just sitting there empty.”

“The last thing she needs to do is move into Bruce Wayne’s bachelor pad,” Luke broke out in a huff then cleared his throat as everyone stopped to stare at him. “Because, you know, it wouldn’t look right,” he said looking pointedly towards Peggy.

“Luke has a point,” Peggy nodded stubbornly. “Listen to your son! Men who have no experience with proper ladies might try to take advantage of a young unmarried girl like our Felicity and I don’t like this ‘bachelor pad’ business one bit!”

“Now see here; Bruce is a good and honorable man,” Lucius told her.

Luke made a noise in his throat then grumbled, “I suppose that’s why he’s always in the gossip columns with some Victoria’s Secret model or bleached blonde floozy on his arm.”

“Aha! Listen to Luke! Luke knows!” Peggy said, pointing toward him in triumph, “If Baby wants an apartment then she can get a condo like Tam but she does not belong in the home of a man like that Bruce Wayne,” Peggy said stubbornly. “It’s not proper.”

“Since when is Luke an expert on proper behavior?” Tam asked wryly. “He does have plenty of experience with floozies though.”
“Not in front of Sara!” Peggy hissed at her before turning a bright smile toward the blonde girl at her side and speaking in an almost musical tone, “She was only joking. Luke appreciates respectable young ladies from good families like yourself; he’s a fine young man.”

“Very fine from what I can see,” Sara said, looking Luke up and down.


“That’s settled then! Baby will stay here with us and not with that bachelor.” Peggy spat out the word as though it were an insult.

“There’s nothing wrong with being an unmarried man,” Lucius told her.

“Of course there is!” Peggy looked at him as though he’d just uttered some form of blasphemy. “A man needs a wife to take care of him and children to carry on his name!”

“Hi, Mrs. Hu?” Tim said, holding up his finger as though requesting a point of order. “Timothy Drake-‘Wayne’; remember me? Yeah, I’m still here.”

“I know that,” Peggy said in a disgruntled tone.

“You know, most people like me,” Tim muttered as he rolled his eyes heavenward. “I happen to very likeable…”

“I still like you, Bunny,” Tam told him with a sympathetic pout.

“I do too but I’m not calling you ‘Bunny’,” Luke told him.

“Mr. Fox?” Tim said, turning towards Lucius hopefully.

Lucius looked at him flatly, “Are you still borrowing my daughter’s sugar?”

“Uh, I’ll just…finish my soup in silence…sir,” Tim said slowly as he turned his attention back to the bowl in front of him.

“See that you do,” Lucius told him in a deadpan before turning back to Peggy, “As for Bruce, despite what the papers may say, he’s a very nice man and I’m sure he has no ulterior motives. He’s just trying to do Baby a favor.”

Tam snorted and Felicity had to nudge her sister with her elbow to get her to shut up.

Peggy scowled at him, “Still, what about the floozies in the paper that Luke mentioned? Do you really think Baby belongs in the home of a man who keeps company with women such as that?”

“That’s right,” Luke said darkly. “You wouldn’t want Baby to be around a man who objectifies women, would you?”

“Because, as everyone knows, you’re an authority when it comes to behaving like a gentleman around respectable young ladies, right Pool Boy?” Tam said pointedly towards her brother.

“Alright enough!” Lucius said, putting his foot down. “I know Bruce well enough to say with confidence that he would never try anything with one of my girls without coming to me like a man and telling me first.” All three siblings and their friends shot each other looks. “Secondly, he doesn’t even use that penthouse; it’s been empty for who knows how long. The only time I’ve ever seen him use it is during the odd business ‘do or to catch a shower and a nap between trips. I doubt he’s stepped foot in it in over a year.” He looked around the table before speaking to the elderly woman
again, “Now Peggy, as much as I would love to have Baby here, she’s a grown woman and she should be allowed to have her own space.”

“Fine, but she still doesn’t need to stay there,” Peggy argued, unwilling to back down quite yet. “That place is too big for her to take care of by herself and it’s in a dangerous part of town. She wouldn’t even know what to do with it.”

“I did have my own place back in Starling City, you know,” Felicity pointed out. “I managed that pretty well and at least with the penthouse I won’t even have to worry about rent or a long commute to work. The offices are located right there in the East End.” It was the truth…sort of. “I’d be safe as houses.” Again, sort of.

“I know for a fact that Bruce has a cleaning service to take care of the whole building including the penthouse,” Lucius told her. “If Baby needs more than that I’ll hire her a housekeeper myself.”

“Dad, I think I can make my own bed and vacuum the floor without help.” Okay, so she didn’t even know where her vacuum was anymore but he didn’t need to know that.

“It’s no problem,” Lucius told her. “I have a contract with a cleaning company who helps out Tam and Peggy Ann. It wouldn’t be that hard to arrange for them to go over a few days a week to your place.”

“Harrumph!” Peggy’s face grew stormy. “I don’t like that service! I can still take care of this apartment without their help! Those maids they send here move things around and try to get into my kitchen! I have to watch all of them like a hawk.”

“Woman, you are pushing eighty; stop giving me a hard time about getting you some help,” Lucius sighed, used to hearing that particular argument. “Whether you like it or not, sooner or later, you are going to have to slow down.”

“I don’t have to slow down,” she said, properly insulted. “I am healthy as a horse! I will outlive you! You’re the one who needs to slow down.”

“Fine, we’ll both retire to Florida and you can nag me to death in the old folk’s home! Now can we get back to Baby?” Lucius said, “If she wants to take Bruce up on his offer I don’t have a problem with it. She’s a grown woman and I trust her to make the right choices.”

“I know that!” Peggy said in a huff, “I raised her and her mother before her and I helped raise Tam and Luke, too! This is my family and I brought them up in a good home. I taught all of them to be kind, smart, and respectable people!”

“And I suppose I had nothing to do with it,” Lucius asked dryly.

“I did not say that,” she said, smoothing her wrinkled hands down her apron. “I just did more.”

“I swear before God, if you look up the word ‘cantankerous’ in the dictionary your picture is right there next to it, you know that?” Lucius grumbled, “Stubborn as an old mule,” he told her as he reached for the plate of cookies.

Peggy smacked him on the back of the hand and at his muffled ‘ow’ she moved the cookies closer to Luke. “No sugar!” She smiled at Sara serenely, “Would you like one of my five spice almond cookies? I make them with artificial almond extract because Baby has allergies but they’re quite good.”

“Thank you,” Sara said, obviously struggling to keep a straight face as she accepted a cookie and bit
into it making an appreciative noise.

“Damn it, I run a multi-billion dollar corporation!” Lucius growled, rubbing his hand.

“No sugar!” She shot back, going from sweet to sour in an instant. “And I still don’t like Baby living in that-that ‘bachelor pad’ by herself.”

“If Felicity needs a roommate I could move in with her,” Tam said brightly. “I could be like her chaperone.”

Luke snorted as he tossed an almond cookie into his mouth, “Yeah, but who’d chaperone you? You’re being all scandalous with Wayne’s son over there, remember?”

“Dude! Respect the Bro Code!” Tim said with a scowl from beside Lucius who suddenly turned a jaundiced eye in his direction at the reminder of his daughter’s nocturnal activities. “Um, Luke’s just kidding…sir.”

“I have an idea,” Tam said with false gaiety, her hazel eyes flashing in her brother’s direction. “If Luke is so worried about Felicity’s reputation and safety then maybe he should move back to Gotham permanently?”

Luke’s jaw dropped in surprise but before he could gather his wits about him Peggy leapt on the opening she’d been given. “Yes! Luke should come back home!” She said, her wizened eyes lighting up again. “He should live with Felicity just like he did in college. They can take care of each other and he can make sure Baby is safe.”

“That’s uh, that’s—“ Luke stuttered.

“And you and Sara could see each other more often,” she smiled at the pretty blonde girl again. “Do you come to Gotham often for your work?”

“I do actually,” Sara said with a bemused grin.


“Don’t you want to see Sara again?” Peggy asked him. “She’s a beautiful girl; very smart, from a good family, and she likes children. You did say you liked children, yes?”

“Sure, love ‘em. Especially with ketchup,” Sara said, obviously just going with the flow at that point.


“Luke has the Foundation to think of,” Lucius broke in smoothly. “As lovely as Sara is,” he smiled at her briefly, “and as much as we are all enjoying her company, Luke has a responsibility to all those African orphans to return to Tinasha after his arm has fully healed.”

“That’s right!” Luke said, “The African orphans! You wouldn’t want me to abandon them, would you, Peggy Ann?”

Her face fell and she sniffed, “I suppose not.”

“Besides, my work takes me down to that part of the world occasionally,” Sara said, throwing Luke a flirty grin. “I’m sure we’ll run into each other sometime. Be nice to have a friendly face down there.”
“Really?” Luke asked brightening up considerably.

“Yeah,” Sara said. “I might just have to look you up sometime, Mr. Fox.”

“Sounds good,” Luke said smoothly. “Maybe I can show you the sights.”

“I hear the local wildlife can be pretty interesting,” Sara said, her eyes darting down to his arm that was now in a temporary brace since his pins had been removed.

“Living down there has its moments,” he agreed.

“That’s wonderful,” Peggy said clapping her hands together before looking crestfallen for a moment. “But who’ll take care of Baby if she lives in that penthouse all by herself?”

“Peggy, it has a doorman and 24/7 security,” Felicity pointed out in exasperation. “I don’t need anyone to take care of me.”

“And besides, if you’re so worried about the girls maybe you should just marry them off or something,” Luke joked as he exchanged flirty glances with Sara.

Felicity kicked Luke hard under the table and he winced. Tam, unable to reach him, threw a murderous glare in his direction. “What did I ever do to you?” Felicity mouthed in his direction.

“Mrs. Iberman’s grandson is a doctor,” Peggy said to Felicity, her expression going from disappointed to inspired. “He’s a gynecologist.”

“That’s handy,” Tam muttered.

“I can talk to her and maybe she can invite him and his roommate to mahjong. You and Tam can come meet them.”

“Wait, what?” Tim asked, looking up.

“What kind of doctor needs a roommate?” Tam asked wrinkling her nose in confusion.

“They’re just good friends!” Peggy said with a pleased look. “They’ve lived together since college. They have a beautiful home together, too. Nice brownstone. Mrs. Iberman says his roommate’s name is Marc and he makes a very good living as a fashion designer. Tam, you like nice designer clothes; maybe if you go out with him he’ll make you something?”

Luke started making a choking sound and hid his face behind his napkin as Lucius rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly and avoided looking at her. Sara looked up towards the ceiling as she nudged Luke warningly with her elbow, Tim just looked mildly outraged at being completely overlooked as a potential suitor, and Tam’s lips quirked upwards as she cleared her throat before answering, “Um, thanks but I think I’m happy with Tim.”

“Damn straight,” Tim muttered. “Besides; son of a billionaire over here. I think I rate better than some fashion designer with a boyfriend and a brownstone.”

“Son?” Lucius said.

“Yes, sir?” Tim asked.

“I’m just starting to like you; don’t push it.”

“Yes, sir.”
“Felicity?” Peggy asked hopefully.

“I don’t really think I’m his type,” she said in a pained voice causing more snickers to erupt from around the table and even causing her father to bite his lip and snort out a quickly extinguished chuckle. “Besides I already met someone I’m thinking of going out with.”

“Who?” Peggy asked.

“Yeah, who?” Luke asked, the amusement leaving his expression.

“Jake Simmons.”

“Who?” Tam asked.

“Yummy McDriver,” Tim reminded her.

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot about him,” Tam said musingly.

“Dude!” Luke said in disgust as he looked at Tim. “‘Yummy McDriver’; really?”

“Hey, no! They’re the ones who came up with the name, not me!” Tim said defensively.


“No, see, it’s this whole Sex and the City thing they do,” Tim said quickly. “You know how Carrie calls JJ Preston ‘Mr. Big’? Well, Barb started calling this Jake dude ‘Yummy McDriver’ and it stuck; I had nothing to do with it, I was just there for the sushi.”

“You watch Sex in the City?” Sara asked slowly and all eyes turned to Tim.

“Um,” Tim froze like a deer in the headlights. “Nooooo comment.”

“I am so embarrassed for you right now,” Tam said flatly.


“Hey, I’m not the one who cried over Campbell Scott,” Tim shot back.

“It was a sad movie,” Luke said tersely.

“Dying Young?” Sara asked him.

“Yeah,” he said reluctantly.

“I love that movie,” she told him, her eyes lit up in sincerity and open admiration. “It’s one of my favorites; I even keep it on my tablet during long flights. I must have watched it a hundred times with my sister. I even read the book.”

“Really?” Luke ducked his head shyly. “I guess it is a pretty good movie...”

“How come he gets points for being sensitive because Campbell Scott regrew hair and I get nothing for Sex and the City?” Tim complained to Tam.

“Tragic love story versus shopping and promiscuous career women.” Tam raised a sardonic eyebrow and gestured as though weighing one against the other and finding his argument severely lacking. “You do the math.”
“If we can get back to the subject at hand,” Lucius looked around the table sternly. “I assume you’re talking about Jake Simmons with Wayne Security?”

“I met him the other day at Wayne Enterprises and he gave me a ride home,” Felicity said, suddenly feeling a little shy for some reason. “He gave me his card and offered to take me around the city, maybe see a few museums or something so we had lunch. That’s okay, right?” She asked him hoping she didn’t just get Jake in trouble. For all she knew there might be some kind of fraternization clause to his contract she wasn’t aware of.

“No, no, that’s fine!” Lucius said quickly. “Jake’s a fine young man.” He turned to Peggy, “Very polite and hard working. He just got out of the military and is already going places. Right now he’s part of my regular security detail until Monroe comes back but then he’s taking a job at our Central City branch as a security consultant.”

“Oh, that sounds good,” Peggy said wide-eyed. “Felicity, you should invite this young man to dinner. Ask him what kinds of food he likes and I’ll cook for him. He and your father can talk about business.”

“I already did. I meant to tell you but I forgot; I invited him to dinner on Friday at seven. I hope you don’t mind but when I talked about you he said he was really looking forward to meeting you and having a home cooked meal for once,” she told Peggy.

“Me? Really?” Peggy said with a delighted expression that took ten years off her face.

“After I told him about you he insisted on it,” Felicity told her, laying it on a little thick but it was working so she kept going. “When I told him about you he said you reminded him of his mother.”

“I like this boy.” She turned her attention to Tam with a scowl, “Why don’t you ever bring home any nice boys like that to dinner?”

“I’m right here!” Tim said throwing his hands up in exasperation.

“You don’t count since you made her get all dirty, remember?” Luke snorted.

“Hey, she was dirty long before…” Tim’s voice trailed off as he turned to look at Lucius who was once again giving him the evil eye. “I meant to say that I respect your daughter very much and would never do anything untoward or toward or forward to her, um, person; basically anything ending in ‘ward’ would be out of the question, sir.”

“See to it you don’t,” Lucius muttered darkly.

“That’s settled then! Having dinner with a young lady’s family sounds like a very nice date, very proper. Afterwards he could take you to the movies. Mr. Hu did that when we were courting. Your father and I could even come along for that. I like the movies.”

“Now you’ve done it. Talk about an epic fail,” Tam said under her breath from beside her.

“Crap,” Felicity breathed.

Even her father shot her a sympathetic wince. “Peggy, I think Felicity will be okay going out with this young man by herself. You and I can go to the movies over the weekend, if you want.” He glanced over at his cookie hoarding son and shot him a glare, “Better yet, you should take Luke! It’s been a while since you and Peggy Ann had a day out all on your own, son!”

“Yes, that would be so nice, Luke,” Peggy said happily. “And Sara, too! We can all go to mahjong.
We could go tonight!” She glanced up at the clock. “It’s still early. All of us can go—even Tim.”

“Thanks,” Tim said in a disgruntled tone. “Now she notices me.”

“Mahjong?” Luke looked from his dad to Peggy Ann’s eager expression and forced an apologetic smile, “Yeah, that sounds great but unfortunately we were all planning on going to a club after dinner.”

“We were?” Tim asked only to wince when Tam kicked him under the table. “Ow, jeez your family is violent,” he muttered.

“Shut up,” she hissed at him. “Or do you want to go to mahjong?”

“I like mahjong,” Tim mumbled rubbing his shin under the table. “I made Imperial Emperor as my high score last time I played it on my tablet.”

“What kind of club?” Peggy asked with a frown.

“Reggae,” Felicity told her. “I know one of the DJs and I thought we could all go out and support him. You know, as a gesture.”

Peggy seemed to waver slightly, “Well, that sounds very nice but all of you used to love mahjong, remember? Luke especially,” she turned to him. “You used to talk about it for days and days afterward.”

“That’s true,” Tam said with an evil grin as she turned to her brother, “Remember how Mrs. Horowitz used to pinch your cheeks and call you her little smushy mouth? Does she still play with the ladies group at the Kaifeng Steles Senior Center, Peggy Ann?”

“Oh yes!” Peggy said happily, turning to Luke and Sara. “I think you’ll enjoy it very much; I know Luke always did. I told the ladies how our Luke came back for a visit and all she could talk about is how much she was looking forward to seeing him again.” She looked over to the man in question, “She said she’s going to get her pinching fingers all ready for her little smushy!”

“Yeah, I remember her,” Luke said, rubbing his cheek as if anticipating the pain to come. “She’s the one who told me what a Sitz bath was. I could have gone my entire life without ever learning what that was,” he muttered.

“What’s a—“ Tim began.

“Don’t,” Luke shook his head. “Seriously dude, just don’t.”

“Do you like mahjong, Sara?” She asked, her eyes lighting up with matchmaking mania. “You can come along if you like.”

“I would love to go to mahjong,” Sara said with as much sincerity as she could muster. “However, Felicity already promised her friend we’d be there and Luke offered to take us just to make sure we arrived safe and sound; isn’t that right, Luke?”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Luke said quickly. “After all; it’s a dangerous city and the girls need all the protection they can get.”

“That’s true,” Peggy said with a nod. “And Luke is very strong. He does all those fancy martial arts, you know.”
“So I hear,” Sara said with twinkling eyes.

“Tim and Tam could go,” Luke said, throwing his sister under the bus.

“Uh, no.” Tam said flatly. “We’re going with you to the club.”

“Nobody ever asks me what I want to do,” Tim muttered then caught his girlfriend’s glare, “Which is to join the rest of you at the club and listen to reggae music."

“So no one wants to go to mahjong?” Peggy said with a hurt expression.

Lucius sighed as he got up from the table, “Let me go get my coat.” He paused to point a stern finger at the elderly woman as he helped gather dishes to take over to the dishwasher, “But I’m telling you right now; you keep that Mrs. Horowitz away from me. Last time I went with you that woman pinched my cheek and not the one on my face!”

“That was just her medication,” Peggy said happily as she gathered up the dirty dishes. “Her aim is much better now.”

“Oh,” Tim said as he stared down at his phone that he had again taken out of his pocket. “Oh no.”

“What?” Tam asked.

“I just googled ‘Sitz Bath’,” Tim said staring down at his phone in disgust.


“I will never doubt you again,” Tim said, turning off his phone and throwing his napkin on top of it.

Sara turned to Luke, “I have to say; between dinner and the show you really know how to show a girl a good time.”

Luke turned to her with a rueful expression, “Yeah well, if you think that was fun you should stick around for breakfast sometime.”

“That an invitation?” She asked in low, husky tones.

Luke offered her a slow, wicked grin in response.

“You kids have fun tonight,” Lucius said after all the dishes had been cleared and he had put on his jacket. “Don’t stay out too late and be careful if you’re going to be out in Midtown traffic. Take a cab or get security to arrange for a town car,” he told all of them but fixed his gaze on Tam in particular.

“I’ll have you know I’m an excellent driver,” she objected.

“For NASCAR maybe,” Tim grumbled.

“Watch it,” she shot back.

“And no messes!” Peggy said sternly at Luke.

“Hey, the smoothie thing was almost five years ago,” he objected.

“Yes, and it was so bad your father had to have the kitchen ceiling repainted,” she told him as Lucius helped her on with her jacket.
“I left the room for like a minute,” Luke objected. “How was I to know the lid would come off like that?”

“Just stay out of the kitchen, son,” Lucius sighed.


“You’re so cute when you pout,” Sara whispered in his ear.

He looked up at her, his expression brightening considerably, and whispered back, “First off, I’m not pouting. And secondly, I’m this cute all the time.”

“Cocky, huh?” Sara asked under breath.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he told her with a confident gleam in his eye.

Peggy put her purse over her arm then turned back to smile benevolently at them, watching their byplay with interest, “Sara dear, are you spending the night tonight? The guest room is all ready for you just in case.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hu,” Sara told her. “I’ll probably be going back to my hotel though.” She looked at Luke from the corner of her eye and he returned her look with interest.

“Night kids,” Lucius called out as they left.

“See? I told you I know what I’m doing but you never believe me,” Peggy lectured him on the way to the foyer. “You always say I should leave things alone but I’m always right.”

“Woman, I swear…” Lucius said, shaking his head in resigned aggravation as he shut the door behind them.

“So, now that you’re moving into the penthouse can I be your roomie?” Tam asked as soon as Lucius and Peggy left the room. “Please?” She begged pitifully.

Felicity looked at her in confusion, “Wait; what? I told you, I’m not moving into Bruce’s place.”

“Are you sure about that? Because that’s not what it sounded like at dinner,” Tim said moving closer to the two of them now that their dad had left the table.

“No, I said I wasn’t taking Bruce up on his offer. I distinctly remember that Dad asked and I said I wasn’t taking it,” Felicity said slowly.

Tam gave her a knowing look, “Baby, you just told Dad and Peggy you were moving into Bruce’s place.”

“I didn’t—did I?” Felicity asked with a frown.

“That’s what I heard,” Sara said as she leaned over her chair and put her hand on her shoulder. “Hey, if you’re getting a penthouse does that mean I might actually have a bed to sleep on when I visit or are you turning the whole thing into one big closet like you did your last place? Because if that’s the case then I’m telling you right now I’m not sleeping on your couch. That last place you had was so drafty I might as well have been sleeping on the porch and if this place is as Zsa Zsa as I think it is then you better do better than pullout couches and futons.”

“She’s right,” Tam said, quickly deciding to cast her lot with Sara. “If Sara and I are both going to be practically living with you then we should get to have a say on which bedrooms we get and how we
“No pink,” Tim said quickly. “And no dust ruffles.”

“Tim, what is it with you and dust ruffles?” Tam asked in exasperation.

“I don’t know,” Tim said, scratching behind his ear apprehensively. “They’re just kind of bizarre and a little creepy to me for some reason.”

“You’re like Baby and the stupid kangaroos!” She told him.

“Kangaroos are dangerous and weird looking,” Tim told her.

“Thank you!” Felicity said nodding at Tim. “Now about these bedrooms, I told you I’m not—“

“I vote king-sized beds,” Sara said, glancing over at Luke. “You never know when you might need the extra room.” She grinned before continuing, “Also Sin might want to come visit along with Thea and Roy so we’ll need a guest room or two.”

“That place is huge! I mean, we’re talking at least five or six bedrooms; we’ll be fine,” Tam said airily.

Felicity looked around at the people crowded around her as she tried to figure out just when the penthouse she thought she had turned down suddenly became a group home for wayward vigilantes, “Wait, what are you--? Since when is everybody--?”

“And we’re still getting a dog, right?” Tim asked. “I distinctly remember someone saying we were getting a dog.”

“We’re definitely getting a dog,” Tam told him.

“Dogs are okay but I like cats,” Sara said musingly.

“We can get both,” Tam shrugged. “But I’m not changing the litter box.”

“Felicity is not moving into the penthouse,” Luke said stubbornly as he joined them but paused to give Sara a hooded look, “Although, if you were, the king-sized bed thing sounds like a good idea.”

She shot her brother a dirty look, “No, I’m not, and not because yet another man in my life thinks he can dictate what I can and can’t do, but because I don’t feel like giving Bruce any more encouragement.” She looked at all of them, “Things are complicated enough between us without me living in his apartment.”

“If you aren’t taking the penthouse then what was all that about at the dinner table?” Tim asked in confusion.

“He’s got a point,” Tam said with a smirk.

“That wasn’t me! Dad was just—just…” Felicity’s voice trailed off as she replayed the entire dinner conversation in her head.

“Crap.”
“Your boss owns his own nightclub; why are all of your clothes so boring?” Tam complained as she rooted through her closet.

“Now my clothes are boring? If my taste is so bad then why is half of what I own in your closet?” Felicity asked peevishly.

Tam peeked her head out to look at her with a frown, “Yeah well, for work it’s fine but this is a club. Where is all your leather and sexy short stuff?”

“The only leather I own is my shoes.” She frowned, “Although I might have a jacket or two in there. I still haven’t gone through everything.”

“They really destroyed your house?” Sara asked as she lay beside her on the bed.

“They left the chifforobe from my bathroom, six boxes of crap, and three racks of clothes. Other than what Diggle and I were able to sneak past them it’s all I have left,” she told her. “I did have a shopping spree on Bruce’s dime but most of that stuff is back at the penthouse.”

“We could go to Bruce’s penthouse and look through that stuff,” Tam said quickly as her head emerged from her closet again.

“You just want to do another closet raid,” Felicity snorted. “Besides, most of what I bought isn’t exactly club wear.”

“Okay, well, this is hopeless. Let’s go into my old room and see what’s in there,” Tam said, walking out of the closet with three garment bags and a pair of sling backs in her hand.
“What’s that?” Felicity asked gesturing towards the clothes slung over her sister’s arm. “I thought you couldn’t find anything?”

“I couldn’t,” Tam shrugged. “This is some stuff I meant to borrow the other day.”

“You know, I always thought you were kidding about your sister but now I totally get it,” Sara whispered in her ear.

“I’m going to have to go shopping again,” Felicity said morosely.

“Come on; let’s go see what’s left in my room,” Tam said motioning for them to join her.

Felicity and Sara got off the bed and followed her out. “I doubt you’ll have anything,” Felicity told her. “After all, you moved out like…” Felicity stopped at the open door to Tam’s old room, her mouth open in surprise.

“I think I know where your sister keeps her clothes overflow,” Sara said faintly.

“Yeah,” Tam said wrinkling her nose, “Dad made me get a storage unit for most of it but this is the stuff that wouldn’t fit.”

“Wow,” Sara said, peering in between the racks and racks of clothes and boxes. “Is there even any furniture in there?”

“Somewhere,” Tam said happily. “You guys wait out there and I’ll see what I can find.”

“Why are you stealing my clothes all of the time if you have all this?” Felicity demanded.

“I already wore all that stuff,” Tam shrugged. “You’re welcome to go through it if you want. I keep meaning to donate it to the Foundation Charity Drive but I never seem to have time to go through it all.”

“This is like a high fashion version of Hoarders,” Sara said in awe and she pulled out a gorgeous evening gown in a deep plum color. “Thea would go nuts in here.”

“Okay, no more ‘borrowing’ any more of my clothes until we go through all of this stuff,” Felicity said in her best Executive Babysitter voice. “Whatever you, Sara, or I don’t want goes to the Foundation, understood?”

“Whatever,” came Tam’s voice from the depths of the room. “We might as well go through the storage unit, too. Or, I should say, ‘units’.”

“You rent out more than one storage unit just for your clothes?” Sara asked her, shock written all over her face. “How big are they?”

“Just 10’ by 20’, and I only have two for the clothes,” came her muffled reply. “There’s also one for shoes and accessories and don’t even get me started on furniture. Ooh! We should get some of that stuff out of storage for our penthouse!”

Sara shook her head and looked at Felicity, “I will never again give you shit about your guest bedroom/closet. At least you actually had room to walk between the racks.”

“The bad thing is that I’m pretty sure that at least half of the stuff in there used to be mine,” Felicity said with a frown as she pulled a sweater dress out of the rack closest to the door. “Hey, I never even got to wear this! I looked high and low for this outfit and you swore you didn’t know where it was!”
“That’s because I probably forgot where I left it. What is it anyway?” Tam called out from the depths of her personal fabric jungle.

“That Kay Unger color block sweater dress!” Felicity told her.

“The brown and tan one with the cowl neck?” Came her muffled reply.

“Yes!”

“Oh. Well it wasn’t your color anyway but it looked great on me. In fact, leave it; I’ll probably wear it to the office.” She emerged from the closet and took one look at the dress in Felicity’s hand. “Yup,” she said, snatching it away from her. “That’s a keeper. Okay, here we go,” Tam said as she handled an armful of garment bags while juggling several pairs of shoes and her re-stolen dress. “We’ll have to change in Felicity’s room though,” she said, catching her breath as she attempted to blow a lock of dark caramel highlighted hair off her nose. Sara reached over helpfully and brushed the hair off of the other girl’s face before helping her with some of the bags. “Thanks,” Tam said cheerfully. “You know, I’m due some va-cay time since we’re between projects so I think I’ll take a few days off next week and we can go through all the units. If you’re still in town and don’t have any plans on Monday you can help me and Felicity and take whatever you want. We’re all the same size or close enough, right?”

“Sure. Besides, if nothing else good comes from this trip then at least I may never have to shop again,” Sara said with a grin. “One problem though: If it’s as bad as I think it is we might have to rent a cargo plane just to haul this load back to Starling City.”

“When I get a place I’ll make sure you have your own permanent guest room and you can leave some there and take the rest to Starling; I’m sure we can find you some luggage, too,” Felicity told her.

“Oh yeah,” Tam snorted. “I think I have a whole set of Tumi luggage you can have that I never even got around to using. We’re talking three big heavy duty cases and a couple of carry-ons so you’re set. Plus, between me and Baby, I’m willing to bet we have a butt-load of garment bags you can have.”

“Why do you have luggage that you don’t even use?” Sara asked, her expression one of awe.

“I work for Wayne Entertainment,” Tam told her. “I’m constantly traveling and scouting film locations or hopping the jet to go to one meeting or another so the production companies occasionally give me ‘gifts’. Between them, the red carpet gift bags, the fashion design houses sending me ‘samples’, and Baby, I never have to actually buy anything,” she told her.

“I am so glad to be a part of the machine that keeps you in freebies,” Felicity said dryly.

“Okay, you know what I don’t get?” Sara asked. “You guys are rich; I mean stinking, filthy, Ollie-rich, and you get more free stuff than you know what to do with; why is that?”

Tam threw an arm over Sara’s shoulders and leaned in confidentially (a move made all the more bold considering that Sara was one of the deadliest women in the world and that they had only just met one another, but Tam had the uncanny ability to make lifelong friends almost instantly. It was but one of the many qualities she’d always admired and envied about her sister), “The thing about rich people, the stinking filthy rich kind of rich people, is that we’re all complete cheapskates at heart.”

“Wait, I know plenty of rich people and they spend a lot of money,” Sara told her.

“Well, that’s because you’re from the West Coast,” Tam told her. “This is Gotham; we’re talking
New England Old Money; you’re from the land of the nouveau riche. New money and old money are from completely different worlds.”

Sara looked from one of the sisters to the other, “Seriously?”

At Sara’s raised eyebrows, Felicity nodded, “It’s weird but true. The nouveau riche spend and the old money saves.”

“Moira Queen seemed like pretty old money to me,” Sara told them, genuine curiosity lighting her features. Felicity didn’t really blame her. Sara came from an upper class mother but a working class dad and together they had raised their kids somewhere in the middle. Given her upper middle class sensibilities the idea of asking about money was considered the height of rudeness and it was always challenging dealing with those issues while maneuvering within the realms of the uber-rich.

One of the lesser reasons Sara and Oliver hadn’t made it was that discrepancy in ‘class’. While Oliver had no problem with Sara’s humbler roots, Sara had never been comfortable mixing in the same circles her sister, Laurel, aspired to. Middle class pride gave her an actual work-ethic and she believed in paying her own way. It was difficult being the girlfriend of Oliver Queen and be expected to wear ten thousand dollar gowns to a charity gala when you worked as a part-time bartender (and a non-paid mask) and not have to accept the occasional hand out. Even though Oliver didn’t get it, Felicity did. Every time Oliver expected his sometimes girlfriend to show up on his arm and handed her his card to go buy something appropriate, it felt less like the gift it was intended to be and more like an imbalance of power to someone like Sara who valued her hard-won independence above all else.

Their dissonance sprang from far deeper roots but that was a contributing factor. The fact that Sara felt comfortable enough to even expose herself to ask those kinds of questions was not lost on Felicity. She trusted them, she trusted her, enough to expose a bit of vulnerability and, weirdly enough, that was what finally helped to release her from some of the guilt she had been feeling since Oliver and she had their moment together.

Unaware of what was going on in Felicity’s head, the other two women continued their conversation without her.

“No, see, Moira Queen was old political money which is actually lower on the rich pecking order than even nouveau riche. It doesn’t matter how old their money is they will always be considered nouveau riche by the old money crowd because politicians are all show and no go, and the nouveau riche don’t respect them because they’re for sale even though they’re the ones usually picking up the check,” Tam told her.

“Are you saying Moira Queen was a ho?” Sara snorted.

“I can think of a few other things to call her,” Felicity muttered then started as both women started laughing at her. “Sorry-sorry, totally didn’t mean to say that out loud!”

“Do I detect a note of bitterness there?” Tam grinned at her sister. “What? Did Moira Queen once call you a secretary and asked you to fetch her coffee or something?”

“You didn’t tell Tam?” Sara asked with a frown then paused as Tam’s smile dropped and she looked at both women with a concerned expression on her face. “Sorry,” she told Felicity with a grimace.

“It’s okay,” Felicity said, reaching out to touch Sara’s arm comfortingly. “Let’s go into my bedroom and talk, okay?”
“So talk,” Tam ordered her the minute they walked into the room. Felicity sat on the bed with Sara as her sister stood in front of them, tapping her toe impatiently as she tossed the armful of clothes and shoes on the chair and vanity.

So Felicity talked. Sara already knew about Malcom Merlyn’s relationship with Moira and that Thea was his biological daughter so that came as no surprise to anyone except Tam. The thing that made both of them sit up and pay attention is when Felicity began to talk about the abandoned contract on her life that had brought Bruce to Starling city to begin with and how she thought that Moira may have had something to do with it.

The truth was, even though Oliver had all but eliminated his mother as a suspect, she still had her doubts. The timing was just too suspicious and Oliver, even though he knew what she was capable of, had a blind spot when it came to the women in his life. For the time being she had too much on her plate to chase down ghosts but, when all this was said and done, she was putting the hunt for whoever was targeting her on her to do list.

“Oliver thought Moira put a hit on you before she died?” Sara asked sharply, the laidback and soft spoken Sara fading into the background as Canary took center stage.

“He says he suspected her but they couldn’t find any proof and Walter denied it when he confronted him,” she told her.

“And that’s why,” Tam glanced over at Sara, “you-know-who brought you home?”

“So she knows about Bruce,” Felicity told Tam. “In fact, I should probably formally introduce the two of you: Sara, aka Black Canary, I’d like to introduce you to my sister, Tamara Fox aka…” Felicity narrowed her eyes at her sister, “What did Tim say you called yourself again?”

Tam blushed; an honest to goodness blush. It was enough to make Felicity believe in miracles, “Foxy Lady,” she admitted bashfully.

“You’re a mask, too?” Sara asked in something bordering delight.

“I was, but only one time,” Tam said holding up an elegantly manicured finger, her cheeks pinking up charmingly.

“And she was awesome,” Felicity said. “Or so I hear.”

“I really was,” Tam said, her confidence returning. “Plus I’m dating a mask, so…”

“Wait; I thought you were dating Tim,” Sara said hitching her thumb at the door.

“Tim’s Red Robin,” she told her.

“Really?” Sara goggled in surprise. “But he seems so…”


“Yeah!” She exclaimed. “How’d that happen?”

Tam shrugged, “I have no idea but, trust me, it wasn’t easy. Keeping him humble is a full time job.”

“So, wait,” she turned to Felicity, “your dad is one of the richest guys in the world next to Bruce Wayne, Lex Luthor, and the Queens, you lost your virginity to Batman in the Batcave, your brother is Batwing, your sister was a mask called Foxy Lady and is dating Red Robin, and yet you somehow
managed to hide all of that from the rest of us for years?” She shook her head in wonder, “This explains a lot.”

“Like what?” Tam asked eagerly, sensing there was a story in the making.

“Like how she managed to take out Slade by herself when the rest of us were down for the count,” Sara snorted.

“Who’s Slade?” Tam asked with a surprised look as her head swiveled back to her sister.

“It’s…nothing,” Felicity said quickly.

“Deathstroke was nothing?” Sara said in disbelief. “Your sister saved all of us; she didn’t tell you about that?”

“Deathstroke?” Tam repeated, her eyes wide with shock. “Who the hell is Deathstroke and what happened?”

“She’s exaggerating,” Felicity said off-handedly while shooting Sara a look. Some things were still best kept under wraps for the time being. “Just some crazy guy we went up against a while back. It was no big deal; I just got lucky.” Sara looked at her sharply from the corner of her eye but thankfully played along.

“It kind of sounds like a big deal,” Tam scowled, not buying it for a second. “I mean, even his name sounds scary; Deathstroke.” She shuddered. “It’s like something out of a horror movie.”

“He was Australian and you know how dramatic they can be,” Felicity said, waving her off. “He had this whole…Pirates of the Caribbean thing going on and he had a penchant for constructing these elaborate revenge scenarios that never seemed to go anywhere because he was way over-juicing on super-steroids to the point that he was all ‘roid rage and a couple of dried cranberries away from a fruitcake. I happened to catch him by surprise one day when he was near a truck full of explosives and, well, let’s just say he got distracted at a very inopportune moment. Trust me; you’re better off not hearing the details of that. Besides, he’s gone now so there’s really nothing to tell.”

“That sound icky; I’m picturing this whole Taz meets a falling anvil thing now,” Tam said wrinkling her nose. “Okay yuck, moving on. Hey, I have to go pee; don’t get dressed until I get back, okay?” She told them before heading into Felicity’s bathroom and shutting the door behind her.

“Slade was ‘no big deal’? And, by the way, it was more like an armored tank filled with explosives than a truck, and you didn’t mention the fact that it blew up because you took him out while the rest of us were practically at death’s door. Hell, Roy was dead there for a minute,” Sara said quietly as she turned to her with an expression of incredulity. “I still don’t know how you survived that and one day soon you’re going to have to break down and give with the details once and for all. All I remember is waking up for a few seconds to the sound of Ollie screaming at the top of his lungs, and then the explosion. The next thing I knew I was waking up in the hospital next to Dad and no one was talking about it.”

Felicity grimaced, “I just…I don’t like thinking about it. It was pretty confusing for me, too. I could try to tell you what happened but even I can’t make sense of most of it. One second I was with your dad tying my bandanna around his leg and he was handing me his gun and the next thing I knew I was standing in front of Slade. I don’t even know how I got there. We were surrounded by those guys and then they were down and…” She took a deep breath, “I don’t know. I can’t explain it.”

“PTSD,” she said knowingly. “Talking helps, believe it or not. I know you don’t want to, none of us
do, but it might help you get all of it straight in your head. Don’t think that talking about this stuff makes you weak just because we don’t. We’re all just so damn numb from everything we’ve been through that it’s just another log on the fire for us. That doesn’t mean we aren’t affected; I know Ollie still has nightmares. So do I for that matter,” Sara said quietly. “Still, it might help to talk to someone.”

“That’s not it, besides who would I talk to?” Felicity asked her quietly as she felt her stomach drop. “My family? Bruce? And what would I say; Oh, by the way, in addition to being a vigilante’s sidekick slash executive assistant, I also killed a bunch of people six months ago?” She closed her eyes, “If Bruce ever found out…”

“Hey, you did what you had to do and none of us ever judged you for that,” Sara said, reaching over to squeeze her hand. “Those guys would have killed you and dad if you hadn’t taken his gun and protected yourself; they weren’t innocents, Felicity. The Mirakuru had turned them into monsters and they healed so damn fast that you had no choice but to put them down. If you hadn’t taken your shots then my dad would be in the ground and us along with him.”

“He’d still say I was a murderer,” she said quietly.

“Then he’s a fucking moron,” Sara said flatly. “It’s one thing for a guy who’s what; 6’2”-6’3” and around 200 pounds of pure muscle to go the two fisted route against a bunch of trained killers raging on super-soldier serum, but it’s quite another thing to expect the same from you. You were on your own, Felicity. You had a gun with a half spent clip and no support because the rest of us were just fighting to stay alive.” She gave her a steady look, “We all broke our vows that day. All of us spilled blood; all of us killed. There was no other choice. It was kill or be killed and we’re all still alive because of everything you did; that’s a win in my book and I won’t make any apologies for that and neither should you.”

“Look, I hear what you’re saying but I’ve freaked out my family and Bruce enough in the last couple of weeks without them finding out about Slade,” Felicity told her. “Once all this other crap is settled me, you, and Tam will have a girl’s night in and we’ll celebrate by reliving the most horrible moment of my life over a Sandra Bullock movie marathon and s’mores. Well, one of the most horrible moments anyway,” she said quickly. “It’s weird how less than six months ago I was pretty much resigned to the fact that Slade was going to cut me in half with a sword right before I blew us both up and now that’s only one of the top five worst things I’ve had to go through in the last four years.” She tilted her head and shrugged, “Maybe the top ten. The thing with the sewer still sticks in my mind as probably the worst thing. Oliver and Dig probably wouldn’t agree but, at least with Slade, the dying part would have been quick and relatively painless and I didn’t have to wade through a river of poo in a pencil skirt first.”

“Yeah, I’ll have to agree with you there; river of poo definitely beats out enraged army of enhanced mercenaries in sucky-ness points for sure. Glad I was out of town for that one,” Sara said easily. “Change of subject?”

“Change of subject,” Felicity agreed.

Sara nodded in understanding, “Gotta. Okay, then; what’s with Tam and the Australian thing? The minute she heard ‘Australia’ she rolled her eyes.”

She sighed, “Tam once dated this really hot Australian guy named Manu who was all hunky muscles and into saving trees, eating tofu, and wearing hemp. For, like, six months she was so into this guy that she stopped wearing deodorant, went totally vegan, and chained herself to a bulldozer in order to stop a blood sucking corporation from leveling a park because they were hell bent on destroying the world by building one strip mall at a time.”
“What happened?” Sara asked, strangely enthralled by the idea that a woman with multiple storage units filled with haute couture and designer labels ever chained herself to anything.

“He left her for the lawyer representing the blood sucking corporate guys who owned the bulldozers,” she told her. “Last we heard, he moved to Malibu with the lawyer to open his own yoga studio and juice bar in one of the evil strip malls.”

“Oh, Sara winced sympathetically.

Felicity shrugged, “It was doomed from the start. She wouldn’t admit it but I know for a fact that she had a stash of beef jerky hidden under her bed the entire time they were dating.”

“So that’s why she dropped the subject so fast?” Sara asked. “Because of her ex?”

She nodded, “I knew the minute I told her Slade was Australian she’d drop it. Ever since they broke up she can’t even stand hearing the accent. Something about how when they were in bed together he would always begin their lovemaking by saying, ‘Oi Sheila, yah sexy thing yah!’” She said, mimicking the rough accent as best she could.

Sara snorted rudely, “That’s hilarious but I still don’t get what that has to do with his accent.”

“Well, it turns out that ‘Sheila’ was the lawyer’s name.”

Sara clapped her hand over her mouth and began to shake with laughter.

“I’m not wearing this,” Felicity said flatly.

“Looks cute to me,” Sara said, admiring her outfit in the large floor to ceiling mirror inside the back of her deep walk-in closet, which, while smaller than the ‘guest room’ had been in her little bungalow, was still the size of a small room unto itself.

Tam should have been a personal shopper, Felicity thought as she looked at Sara’s outfit. It was a butterfly sleeved silk shift mini-dress in a rich cobalt blue with a pair of delicate looking crystal embellished Rene Caovilla strappy heels. It was very 1960’s mod and looked perfect on her. The micro-mini hemline made her legs look sky high while covering her arms and back, skirting the line between sexy and modest, and made her pale blue eyes pop.

Too bad the same couldn’t be said for her outfit.

“This isn’t a dress,” Felicity said shaking the hanger in emphasis. “It’s a jacket.”

“It’s a tuxedo dress,” Tam said, checking the hemline of her silver beaded Naeem Khan cocktail dress that hit her well above the knee with a low cut neckline and shimmered in the light. She paired it with a silver pair of Jimmy Choo’s that Felicity was pretty sure once belonged to her.

“Where’s the rest of it?” Felicity demanded.

“Just try it on,” Tam sighed. “Oh, wait!” She said, rushing out into Felicity’s bedroom.

“I’m not wearing this,” Felicity muttered even though she was already taking off her clothes to try it on.

“I think it’s sexy,” Sara said with a naughty glint in her eye. “It’s got this whole Liza slash Marlena Dietrich vibe.
“Says the only bisexual woman currently in the room,” Felicity huffed as she sat down on the low slipper chair to remove her socks after stripping off her shirt and jeans.

“Wait; currently? Is Tam…?” Sara let her question hang in the air.

“Oh my God, I am in queer girl heaven,” Sara said, turning to her all agog. “It’s like your whole family is one big sexual smorgasbord. I don’t know who I want to jump more right now; your brother, your sister, or you.”

“Eh,” Felicity shrugged, “On occasion, but she avoids labels. She prefers to just think of herself as a ‘people person’. She had this whole Women’s Studies phase when she was at Sarah Lawrence.” She shook her head, “Dad was so confused.”

“Well, I like you but my sex life has too many masks in it as it is, Tam’s with Tim…although Tim would probably jump for joy if you tried; he’s got this whole fantasy life you don’t even want to know about—“

“All men have that fantasy,” she said wryly. “What they don’t get is that when two women get together, even if they’re both okay with men, the last thing they’re thinking about when they’re together is a guy. I mean, why would we?” Sara said with a slow smile, “Just look at all the fun bits we have to play with and no refractory period; we get to go nonstop for as long as we want. Women are the Energizer Bunnies of sex; we keep going and going…unless there are toys involved, in which case we stop to put in a new set of batteries and then we go some more.”

“I never did that,” Felicity said, wrinkling her nose.

“Never?” Sara asked in surprise. “I thought every single girl kept a couple of toys in her nightstand for occasional stress relief these days, especially a techie like you. I’d have thought you’d have one that worked over Wi-Fi and lighted your cigarette afterwards.”

“I’m just not into the whole mechanical love thing,” she told her. “It’s not a matter of prudishness as much as it’s laziness on my part. I’d rather just lay back and let someone else do all the work.”

Sara laughed just as Tam walked into the room with some lingerie in her hand. “What did I miss?” She asked.

“We were just talking about your interesting dating history in college,” Sara said with something bordering on a leer as she gave Tam’s long toned legs a second look.

“Oh yeah, Felicity mentioned you walked on both sides of the fence. Yup, I’m in the club, too. Of course, I haven’t been with a woman since my whirlwind tour through Europe where I shagged more carpet than a rug merchant. Since then I’ve been strictly deep pile.” Sara began laughing so hard tears ran down her cheeks while Felicity merely shook her head.

“I love your family,” Sara said to Felicity as soon as her laughter was under control.

“We’re a scandal,” Tam told her with a wink before handing Felicity the lingerie in her hands, “Here.”

“No,” Felicity said, looking at the garter belt, black French lace panties, matching low cut push up bra, and sheer black thigh highs in her sister’s hand.

“Well, what were you planning on wearing then?” Tam huffed in irritation.

“Pants but, barring that, tights,” she said indicating the silver plastic container beside her.
“No way,” Tam said, snatching it away.

“Hey, leggo my egg-hose!” Felicity snapped.

“You did not just say that,” Sara snorted.

“The whole point is to have fun and look sexy!” Tam told her.

“For who?” Felicity asked.

“For yourself,” she told her. “Just get out of your rut and have fun for once. Be scandalous,” she said with a wicked grin and a wink. “Join the rest of us sinners down in the club and shake your fine ass.”

“It is a nice ass,” Sara nodded sagely.

“It’s a freaking awesome ass,” Tam agreed, “and it deserves a night out on the town where it can be fully appreciated by other fun-loving asses.”

“If I go out in that,” she said indicating the outfit and lingerie, “my freaking awesome ass will get frostbite,” Felicity shot back.

“At least it’ll be bitten by someone other than Bruce or Ollie for once,” Sara told her.

“Funny,” Felicity said flatly.

“Too soon?” She said with a mischievous pout.

“The dress has long sleeves,” Tam pointed out.

“And that’s it! I have shorts longer than that ‘dress’—a lot longer; like six inches longer and those are my short-shorts!”

“How is it that Luke and I are both a couple of sexual deviants and our baby sister turned out to be such a prude?” Tam tutted.

“I’m not a prude,” Felicity scowled. “I’m just not willing to get frostbite over a fashion statement.

“Come on, Felicity,” Sara said sitting next to her and putting her arm around her shoulders. “You know how they say the best revenge is living well? Well, the best way to fix a little heartbreak is to strut out of a rut.”

“She’s absolutely right,” Tam told her. “The best way to build your confidence back up is to walk out of here looking supermodel tight so you can remind the world that you aren’t just ‘Felicity Smoak’ overpaid secretary—”

“I was not a secretary!” Felicity said indignantly.

“—but ‘Baby Fox’; sexy bitch!” Tam finished gleefully.

“Three sexy bitches,” Sara grinned. “We are going to own this town by the time we’re done.”

Felicity glowered at both of them, her lips pooched out in a moue of displeasure, “And I wasn’t overpaid; I was grossly underpaid. How many personal assistants regularly deal with armed gunman and bombs? Not many let me tell you. That is a unique skillset,” she grumbled. “Try putting that on a résumé some time.”
“C’mon Baby,” Tam said holding up the garter belt teasingly. “You know you’re dying to get all scandalous; why should we have all the fun?”

“This is peer pressure, you know that?” She said weakly as she looked from one woman to the other. “I feel like I’m trapped in a slutty after school special.”

“Come on Cutie, slut up or shut up,” Sara joked.

“It’s so short,” Felicity muttered as she reluctantly took the lingerie from her sister. “I mean, I wear short skirts but there’s short and then there’s short.”

“It will hit about mid-thigh which isn’t that short, trust me,” Tam waved her off.

“Well, upper mid-thigh,” Sara said, holding it up and examining it more closely. “It’ll still cover your cookie though.”

“It’s not that short,” Tam repeated. “It’s a perfectly acceptable length, trust me.”

“For a stripper maybe. And speaking of strippers,” Felicity picked up the garter and stockings again and pointed at the leopard print suede Manolo Blahnik’s Tam had set on the floor. “Are you turning me out or are we all going on the pole tonight?”

“I’m definitely considering it,” Sara mused aloud then caught the expression on Felicity’s face. “What? Your brother is hot.”

“Ew,” Felicity breathed.

Tam stuck her hands on her hips and went into her stubborn face mode, “First off; pole dancing should be an Olympic sport.” She and Sara took a second to high five each other over that one. “I took a class last year at my gym and it paid off in spades; Tim and my ass were both happy with the results. Secondly, just put the damn outfit on so we can get out of here!”

A little while later Felicity was dressed, albeit reluctantly. Even so, as she looked at her reflection in the mirror, she had to admit she looked damn good. The tuxedo ‘dress’ (she still thought it was just a jacket) hit her high on her mid-thigh, just under the lace band at the top of her stockings. The dress was styled like a double breasted men’s tuxedo jacket that nipped in at the waist emphasizing her hourglass figure with satin lapels, covered buttons, and had a low neckline that almost, but not quite, exposed the lace push-up bra. On her feet were the leopard suede Bridget Bardot pumps that were at least comfortable and did, she had to admit, give the outfit a funky edge.

She had on minimal makeup, just some mascara and eyeliner and a sheer gloss, hoping to downplay the look but it just seemed to accentuate the sexiness of the whole ensemble even more. Tam had fluffed and fussed her golden curls into a messy bedhead look that tumbled down her shoulders. With her contacts in and the sheer silk stockings making her legs look impossibly long she had to admit, she felt a little better already.

She still looked like a stripper though; albeit a classy one. That or a really successful magician’s assistant.

The women walked into the TV lounge where the guys were watching a ball game still sitting around in what they were wearing at dinner. Apparently jeans and pullover sweaters were acceptable club wear for men. They did look good though: Luke’s Burberry London cable knit sweater was a deep chocolate that looked all the more rich against his tawny eyes and café au lait complexion and stretched over his muscular chest emphasizing his build while Tim’s navy Alexander McQueen skull sweater (obviously a gift from Tam) matched his eyes and brought out the highlights in his inky
black hair perfectly.

“Holy…” Tim said, turning to whistle appreciatively at his girlfriend’s sparkling silver mini-dress. “Wow.”

Luke stood up and walked over to Sara, his eyes fixed on the richly colored cobalt silk as he looked at her from head to toe. “You look gorgeous,” he told her.

“Thanks handsome,” she said, linking her arm through his. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Are we ready to go?” Felicity asked reaching for her coat.

“Wait—what?” Tim goggled at Felicity’s outfit. “You can’t go out like that!”

“Damn right she can’t!” Luke said, suddenly noticing his little sister.

“Okay, that settles it; I’m putting on some jeans,” Felicity said, turning on her heel to leave only to be stopped by Tam when she grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

“What’s wrong with her outfit?” Tam demanded, looking from her boyfriend to her brother as she moved to stand beside Felicity.

“There’s no bottom part for one,” Luke said, pointing to her legs.

“So?” Tam said. “Her dress is the same length as mine.”

“Yeah, but you’re you and she’s…Felicity,” Tim stuttered.

“Wait; I’m ‘Felicity’?” The woman in question asked, suddenly feeling a bit perturbed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s just…uh,” Tim floundered before looking towards the only other person in the room on his side.

“He means that—” Luke pointed out her outfit with a grimace, “that doesn’t look right on Baby, that’s what! She looks too—too—”

“Sexy,” Tim said with a frown that was decidedly less than appreciative.

“Yeah!” Luke said.

“And what’s wrong with her looking sexy?” Tam asked with a scowl.

“Yeah?” Felicity asked.

“It just is!” Luke insisted.

“Exactly,” Tim nodded.

“You don’t have any objections to me looking sexy,” Tam frowned at her boyfriend.

“It just…it just isn’t the same thing,” Tim said gruffly, his arms crossing in front of his chest in such a way that, for a second there, made him look so much like Bruce that Felicity almost questioned the fact that he was his adopted son and not his biological one.

“How about we do this then?” Sara asked, stepping forward to join the ladies before smiling sweetly
at the boys. “If what she has on bothers you both so much, why don’t Felicity and I just switch outfits?”


Sara narrowed her eyes at him, “So…you’re okay if I wear that dress but not if your sister does?”

“Um…” Luke said helplessly.

“Maybe we should…go,” Tim said, obviously deciding it was best to make a strategic retreat.


“That’s what I thought,” Tam said, linking her arms with those of her companions, “Shall we go break a few hearts, ladies?”

“Might as well,” Felicity said, reaching for her coat again but this time with a touch more strut.

The Irie Club was hopping as music from Sean Paul, Jah Vinci, Mark Balet, Sean Kingston, and old school Ziggy Marley filled the air. The strong thumping bass and island funk had bodies bouncing to the rhythm as their combined body heat made the atmosphere feel less like a Gotham winter and more like a Jamaican summer fantasy.

True to his word, dropping Mr. Mention’s name at the door had gotten them through the velvet rope. Her companions barely took a single sip of their drinks before they hit the floor. She watched as Luke and Sara danced, their bodies rubbing against one another to a remix of Sean Paul’s Temperature. Looking at them from where she was sitting she doubted a sheet of paper would fit between them. Tim and Tam were having an equally intimate session on the crowded dance floor as he ground his hips into hers, his head dipping to kiss the arch of her neck as his arm snaked across her abdomen, his hand dangerously close to the swell of her breast. Yep, they were having a fine old time.

Meanwhile Felicity, aka the Fifth Wheel, was sitting at their table nursing the same fruity cocktail she ordered almost an hour and a half ago and had yet to take off her coat even though it was actually getting pretty hot in there.

Way to get scandalous, she told herself.

She managed to keep her strut up until they actually walked into the club and she sat down at their booth. As soon as her strut stopped all she felt was tired and depressed, her sleepless night finally taking its toll.

Every once in a while someone would come over and ask her to dance but she just wasn’t in the mood. The music was great and the atmosphere was fun but she was exhausted. So much so she just didn’t have the energy to get out there dressed like one of the back-up dancers at Cher’s Vegas show and pull it off with confidence.

What’s worse was that as tired as she was she couldn’t get her brain to shut up. She kept going back to her conversation with Oliver over and over, questioning the exact same things until she was sick to her stomach. She’d given so much to the team and to Oliver personally and yet it felt like she had failed him somehow. It wasn’t just about the sex; they weren’t dating, no commitments had been made, no promises exchanged. It had been sex, just sex. Good sex but other than some vague promises to see how it went followed by it hitting a brick wall there was nothing there. Not really.
And still she felt like she had failed.

Okay, she was lying to herself; it was about the sex. She slept with Bruce and now she felt like she should go around with a scarlet A on her chest. Sure, technically when she slept with Oliver that could be considered cheating on Bruce since she’d slept with him first, right? She’d spent almost four years with Oliver and he barely spoke to her then Bruce shows up and suddenly he’s all over her and promising her a future together…wait, come to think of it…

She went back over their post-coital discussion in her head.

Nope, nothing. The closest he ever came to telling her he loved her was when he announced he was in and that she belonged to him but that wasn’t even close to the same thing. And what was he ‘in’ exactly? Besides her that is? And as soon as he was ‘in’ he got the hell back ‘out’. And what the fuck does ‘I wish I could love you’ mean? Does it mean I do love you or does it mean I like you but I don’t love you?

And then there was Bruce…

Bruce.

He wanted something approaching a commitment. Sort of.

Who was she trying to kid? She thought as she sipped her drink through a straw. He wanted a commitment as long as she was the one doing all the committing and he never had to admit he was her boyfriend publicly.

She narrowed her eyes and rolled all that over in her head. Both men kissed her, both men had sex with her, both men dumped her, and then both men gave her ambiguous speeches about how they were but weren’t into her in order to string her along.

Well, Oliver kind of told her that it was over and to move on. He did say ‘move on’, it was just the way that he said it that was the problem. He said it in a ‘move on because we can’t be together but I want to be with you but I can’t be with you’ sort of angsty circuitous kind of way. It was like he released her but then he sort of didn’t; he released her but with emotional strings attached. One tug and she’d be back in his arms, even though they’d probably wind up going through this whole thing all over again. If this is how he broke up with all his exes no wonder they kept coming back for more.

“Huh,” she frowned as she tilted her head and thought about that.

Laurel, Sara, Helena…

Hang on a second.

“Son of a bitch.”

She was now officially a member of Oliver’s rotating playlist of angst-filled relationships.

“My life fucking sucks,” she muttered as she took another sip of her frozen daiquiri which ceased to be frozen an hour ago. “Plus I can’t be bitchy about Laurel anymore since I am Laurel now.” She dropped her head on the table and whined, “Oh God, I’m Laurel! Oliver is Tommy and Bruce is Oliver.” She lifted her head in confusion, “Or is Oliver Oliver and it’s Bruce that’s Tommy? Okay, if I’m Laurel…” she frowned, “I’m so confused; now I’m thinking I should have just dated Tommy to begin with and avoided all this crap even though he never talked to me or even noticed me for that matter. Actually he kind of looked through me just like the rest of Oliver’s friends and family did.
Actually, come to think of it, Tommy was kind of an asshole, too. Plus, you know, he’s dead so that would have been a stumbling block in regards to the whole dating thing…” She took another sip of her drink.

So was she with Oliver or Bruce? Or both of them? Or neither of them? Bruce wanted her but didn’t, and Oliver wanted her but couldn’t, so what did she want?

“An uncomplicated relationship for once?” She muttered out loud then snorted.

Why do I keep falling for this crap? Ask them a simple yes or no question and get a three page treatise on life, love, and everything else except the answer to the original question.

Bastards.

“I need to get out of here,” Felicity muttered to herself.

She got up, dropping some bills on the table and headed out the door of the club into the street. She stopped outside to text Sara and let her know where she was heading.

//Tired; going home in a cab. You guys stay and enjoy.//

Sara texted back almost instantly.

//K. Luke & I are heading back to my hotel. Later Cutie.//

//TMI// She typed quickly with a note of disgust. She so didn’t need that visual this close to bedtime.

Felicity tried to wave down a cab but the minute one pulled up some drunk girls pushed past her and jumped inside giggling rudely before it pulled away.

Screw it, she thought as she looked around to get her bearings.

She slung her bag across her chest and stuffed her hands in her pockets as she trudged toward the subway station. Technically she could walk all the way to the Wayne Foundation building and crash; after all, she had clothes there and she could work on Watchtower if for no other reason than to distract herself from the mess her life had become. Even though it was located in Midtown it wasn’t that far away and with enough shortcuts through alleyways she could walk there in forty-five minutes or less. Driving in traffic took longer than just walking it but it was fucking cold. A couple of blocks in and she wished she had put her foot down about the stupid mini-dress and dug out her jeans and long johns. Sexy it might be but her garter belt was growing icicles. She’d gotten far too used to living in a city where ‘winter’ translated to sweater weather. Not even her trench was keeping out the wind and, while the heavily ribbed silk/wool blend coat she was wearing was pretty, she was kind of wishing she had bought a parka instead. She passed the park and noted ruefully that even the muggers were smart enough to stay out of this weather before slipping into the subway station and hopping on the red line. She sat down in the car that was nearly empty except for a few late night commuters and some teenagers who looked like they’d been out to the clubs and stewed in her own misery until her stop several minutes later.

She got off at the 52nd Street stop near the MoMA and decided to walk the rest of the way to the Wayne Foundation rather then head home to the Upper West Side in a cab. As tired as she was her mind was still too full and she needed to do something constructive. The tech she’d ordered the other day should have been delivered and she wanted to at least look through it. All she had to do was cut through a few alleys and she’d be there. She hurried out of the subway and practically ran up the stairs leading above ground hoping to generate some heat. She jogged up the sidewalk, more worried about keeping warm than busting her ass in high heels, and cut through a narrow alleyway.
...and that’s when she heard it.

“Give us your bag, bitch!”

“I guess all the muggers weren’t smart enough to stay inside, after all.” Felicity turned with a sigh and faced two pimply faced teenagers, one Latino and one Caucasian. It was the same two teenage boys she’d clocked on the subway. They were both dressed in ripped jeans, graphic tees, and leather jackets that didn’t do crap for keeping out the weather. The dark haired Caucasian boy was holding a knife out toward her with a trembling hand although she doubted it was from the cold. Both of them had blown pupils and a sickly pallor that screamed ‘habitual drug user’. They were coming off a high and probably decided she looked like she was good for a fix.

“I said give me the bag, you stupid cunt!” The boy shouted at her and her brain quickly assessed the situation.

Although bigger than she was, each one of the boys was half the body mass of John Diggle and he’d taught her to toss him around like a sack of flour. The knife was a little troublesome, as was the fact that there were two of them, but she’d been trained for this type of situation on an almost daily basis for nearly two years now. She had her Glock in her purse but she didn’t try to reach for it. She was pretty confident that she could take them down without it.

She arched an unconcerned eyebrow at them and crossed her hands over her chest, setting her stance, “You know what, I would have gladly given you boys a couple of bucks had you asked nicely but you picked the wrong moment and the wrong damn word.”

“Give him the fucking bag, bitch!” The Latino boy said, rushing her and snatching at her bag. As soon as he rushed her she swiveled her hips and brought her leg up, twisting around him and catching him in the ribs. His body, already off balance from the clumsy attack, was propelled into the brick wall with an audible smack, the stiletto heel of her Manolo’s cutting across his abdomen and leaving a bloody rip in the fabric of his thin t-shirt. As soon as the other boy saw his friend go down he charged her, the knife held low but on an upward sweep as he lunged for her.

Felicity’s arms crossed as she arched her back, leaning her torso away from the knife. She slammed her crossed arms on his wrist, her top hand grasping his elbow as she blocked and twisted his arm behind him. Without thinking twice she allowed the blade to sink deep into his lower back as she brought up her knee and smashed it into his face. The boy screamed and went down. The Latino boy struggled up from where he was laying, his face a bloody mess from where it had hit and scraped against the brick and asphalt. He reached behind his back and pulled out a gun holding it gangster style in a move that made her want to roll her eyes.

Faster than the boy could blink Felicity again brought up both her crossed hands and slammed them into his wrist below the gun. As her forearm hit his wrist he reflexively loosened his grip and, using the hand on top of her block, she jerked the gun sideways as her other arm locked against him. With a sickening crunch his trigger finger was pulled backwards at an unnatural angle and he jerked away with a cry, the bone protruding from the damaged digit.

She turned the gun on them, her grip and stance in perfect military combat form; one hand on the grip and one to steady her aim. “Here’s a hint boys; holding your gun like that looks good on TV but it doesn’t do much in real life except give you cruddy aim and burn the crap out of your hand after it expels the spent cartridge.” She glanced at it, noting the discoloration on the metal caused by finger oils, “Plus, this thing is a piece of junk. The sights are off, the metal looks cheap, and when is the last time you even cleaned this thing? What is that?” She scratched at something red that was stuck on the sight notch, “Gummy bears? Seriously? If you’re going to go around robbing people at gunpoint
you should at least invest in a decent weapon and not store it with your fruit snacks.”

“Aw fuck, Julio, I’m fuckin’ dyin’, man!” The boy groaned from the ground, his hand reaching behind him to touch the knife that was protruding from near his kidney. “That fucking bitch stabbed me!”

“You know, I am holding a gun even if it is a piece of shit,” Felicity pointed out calmly. “You might want to go easy with the ‘bitch’ comments.”

The Hispanic boy took one look at her and the gun and one at his fallen friend as he clutched his ruined hand to his chest before scrambling to his feet to run. Unfortunately for him he didn’t get very far before he ran into a big wall of flesh that was dressed in black armor from head to toe.

Batman clocked him in the jaw and the boy crumpled to the ground in a soundless heap. Reaching into his belt he pulled out a pair of zip tie cuffs and secured his hands behind him. He then walked over to the bleeding and moaning boy who was shouting, “We didn’t do shit, man! That crazy fuckin’ bitch attacked us!”

“Shut up,” he growled, kicking him with his boot in the face causing the boy to go unconscious. He zip tied his hands behind him as well then reached into his belt for a small canister. He sprayed foam over the knife to stabilize it. “Oracle,” he said over his coms although his eyes were locked on Felicity who was still holding the gun, albeit now at her side rather than trained on the muggers.

“Call the police and tell them to send a bus. Two suspects are down, one with a stab wound below the kidney and one with a compound fracture to the hand.” He paused as though listening to something before gritting out, “No, it was Felicity. Yes, I said Felicity. Batman out.”

“Why hello Batman, fancy meeting you out here; out for a stroll, I see?” Felicity asked brightly with an unnaturally cheery grin.

“What the hell are you doing out in the East End in the middle of the night?” Bruce growled deep in his throat as he stalked toward her until he was deep inside her personal space.

“Picking up teenage boys, what the hell do you think?” Felicity said, dropping all pretense of good humor. “Here,” she shoved the gun at him and he took it, stripping it down without even looking, the metal components hitting the broken asphalt with a hollow sound. She turned on her heel to march back down the alley where she was originally headed but he caught her by the elbow and spun her around.

“You aren’t going anywhere,” he growled again, his teeth bared in anger.

She looked pointedly at the gauntleted hand gripping her elbow then back up to Bruce, “I’m sorry, but didn’t you just call the cops? Unless you want me to stick around and give a statement I was on my way somewhere, thanks.”

As soon as she said the words the sounds of sirens broke through in the distance and Batman tugged her closer, wrapping his arm around her waist as his other hand reached for and deployed the grappling gun at his belt. A split second after shooting the grappling hook into the air they began a swift ascent upwards into the night. Felicity automatically reached her arms around Bruce and held on until he kicked out with his legs and landed them lightly on the rooftop of the building.

She shivered and moved closer to his body so that his leather-like reinforced Kevlar cape shielded her from the wind. “God, it’s cold up here,” she said, teeth chattering.

“What the hell were you thinking?” He asked, his hands gripping her shoulders firmly. “You could
have been killed!”

She put her hands on her hips and glared up at him (even though all she really wanted to do was snatch the cape off his back and wrap it around her like a blanket), “I’m sorry, but in case you didn’t notice, I had both those guys on the ground and disarmed before you even showed up!”

“Goddamn it, Felicity!” Bruce ground out, releasing her shoulders and walking away from her a few steps, “Are you trying to get yourself killed? Do you have some kind of death wish or something?”

“So says the man dressed like a flying rat who leaps from rooftop to rooftop like he’s a five year old playing hopscotch!” She snapped before throwing her hands up in defeat, “I give up; it’s too fucking cold up here to do this with you,” she looked around for the roof access. “Figures. I just wanted one night, just one night out and, of course! Not only do I get mugged but you show up. My life sucks. How the hell do I get off this—ah!” She stomped across the gravel and tar roof towards the locked and chained roof access door. She looked at it and cursed, “Damn it! Freaking padlock; of course it couldn’t be a keypad, could it?” She rifled through her purse then sighed, “Left my lock picks in my other purse; great!” She looked around for a fire escape.

“What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?” He demanded, watching her as she looked around.

“Couldn’t sleep so I thought I’d go for a stroll, not that it’s any of your business.” She stomped her feet and wrapped her arms around herself, “Goddamn it, where are all the fire escapes? And who chains a roof access door anyway? Isn’t that like a fire hazard?”

“Not my business?” Bruce bit out, stalking toward her again. He pointed in the direction of the alley, “Everything you do is my business!”

Felicity did a double take and laughed, “Excuse me? Say what now? I thought you were the one lobbying for an uncommitted non-relationship the other day. Taking a personal interest in what I do outside of your bedroom is a touch relationship-y, don’t you think?”

His jaw clenched, “There were two perps with a knife and a gun and you were unarmed! Also, what if the cops came on that scene and saw what you did? You could have been charged with felony assault!”

“First off, nice to see you’re finally using that fancy law degree for something—even though you are completely wrong! In what universe would an unarmed woman who defended herself against two armed attackers who were high as kites get charged with assault?” She asked with an eye roll. “Also, I’m not as fragile as I appear which kind of explains the fact that they’re both on the ground bleeding and I’m up on the roof freezing my ass off talking to you! What is it with you and dragging me around rooftops in the middle of winter anyway? Look, I know you want to stand out here and holler at me all night long but I need off this building so unless you want me to take my chances and jump, you’d better get me down from here!”

“You aren’t going anywhere until we have this out,” he told her stubbornly.

“Okay, fine; have it your way,” she said stepping to the edge of the building and looking down. “Won’t be the first time I’ve had to jump off a building, let’s just hope I land somewhere soft.”

Before she could blink Bruce had her in his arms and they were repelling off the other side of the building. Just as they hit the ground the tumbler came roaring up, the door flying open. “Get in,” he ordered moving over to the driver’s side.
“I’ll catch a cab, thanks.”

“Get in the car now!” Bruce growled at her.

Felicity considered arguing with him but then she felt the heat pouring out of the interior of the tumbler and pride went out the window. She slipped inside the warm car, grimacing as her butt hit the seat, “What is it with you and cars that have hard seats?”

“It’s not a luxury car, it’s a weapon,” Bruce snapped.

“Well it does explain a lot,” Felicity said with a sigh. At his dark look she shot him a withering glare, “The reason the Bat is always in such a foul mood; his ass is sore.”

At that moment the small screen on the dash lit up and she could see Alfred looking back at them from the Watchtower monitors. “Sir, will you be coming back to the manor early tonight?”

“Yes,” he bit out.

“Um, no,” Felicity said quickly. “You’re dropping me off at the Wayne Foundation or, barring that, Wayne Tower.” She looked at Alfred and smiled, “Hello Alfred.”

“Hello Miss Felicity, Miss Barbara mentioned you found a bit of trouble. Do you require any medical attention?” He asked in concern.

“Nope,” she said cheerily. “I was safe as houses; Bruce is just in a tizzy because I beat up the bad guys before he had a chance to.”

Bruce’s jaw clenched, “We’re coming in. Both of us,” he said for her benefit.

“No, I’m not. I’m going to the penthouse,” she told him stubbornly. “My clothes are there and I’d like to change into something warmer.”

“Fine,” Bruce spat out through clenched teeth. “Never mind Alfred, we’ll be at the penthouse so Felicity can change her outfit.”

“You don’t have to make it sound like I’m planning on putting on a floorshow or something,” she shot back.

“Do you require anything before I retire then, sir?”

“No.” Bruce said tightly.

“Miss?”

Felicity resisted snickering at the flash of annoyance on Bruce’s expression as Alfred addressed her, “No, thank you. Bruce made me stand on a roof top as he dressed me down for stealing his thunder so I’m a bit chilled but otherwise I’m fine.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather come to the manor, Miss?” Alfred asked with a frown. “Mrs. Hu led me to believe that you were quite susceptible to the cold during our previous conversations. Have you had breakfast?”

Felicity opened her mouth to answer him when Bruce cut him off, “She’s fine, Alfred! Just go to bed.” He shot her a dark look as his hands tightened on the steering wheel.

“Very well, sir. Miss Felicity,” Alfred said before logging off.
“You and I are going to talk, starting with you jumping out of my car the other day in the middle of traffic and ending with you taking down two armed punks in the middle of a dark alley!” He spat out.

“Better yet, why don’t you just drop me off at a diner somewhere and I’ll find my own way home. I actually wouldn’t mind a little breakfast,” Felicity said, perversely deciding to poke the bear a little. “A couple of Alfred’s scones would have really hit the spot come to think about it.”

“What the hell was that back there?” Bruce asked angrily as he ignored her sarcasm.

She raised a superior eyebrow in his direction, “Krav Maga; why, was my form off?”

“Is that what Queen let you do in Starling City?” He asked her, “Run around in the middle of the night baiting muggers and drug addicts?”

“No, actually this was my first mugging. The only thing he ever let me be bait for is the occasional serial killer, drug kingpin, and mob thug.” At the thunderous look on his face Felicity leaned back against the headrest and rolled her eyes, “Seriously Bruce; lighten up. I would just like to go one day without you getting your panties in a twist over every little thing.”

“Every little thing?” He thundered. “Two armed drug addicts just attacked you!”

“So?” She snorted. “I handled it.”

“You handled it?” He asked sarcastically. “You call stabbing a man handling it?”

“Well, he called me some very nasty things,” she said easily. “Besides, it wasn’t like it was a life threatening wound or anything. He’ll be out of County General and in lock up within a couple of hours.”

“Is this who Queen turned you into? Someone who can use a knife or a gun and not think twice about it?”

That hit a little too close to home but she shrugged it off and kept her tone light, “No, this is who Diggle and Canary turned me into,” she answered him. “And, if you want to get technical about it, this is who you turned me into first.”

“I never intended you to be out in the streets and you know it,” he told her. “If your father ever found out—“

“Found out what? That you had sex with me? That you broke my heart twice? That you introduced me to a life of vigilantes and street thugs?” Her eyes flashed with newly awakened anger. “Pick one, but remember that ‘sorry’ means you regret the actions you’ve taken and you don’t regret a goddamn thing about any of it!”

“I regret a lot when it comes to you, Felicity,” Bruce said in a low tone, his eyes firmly fixed to the road as they entered the tree lined drive to the secret entrance to the alternate Batcave.

“Do you regret turning Luke into a Batman knockoff and shipping him to Africa?” She asked him. “Or letting Tam play Tim’s costumed sidekick?”

“Tam did what?” Bruce asked in confusion before shaking his head, “Luke came to me asking to be trained, I didn’t recruit him.”

“And what about Barbara, or Cassie, or Selina, or any of the other women you’ve trained? What
makes me any different from any of them, huh?” She challenged. “I know you don’t have a problem
with sending a woman out into the field so why am I the exception?”

“You just are!” He burst out before slamming on the brakes and pulling into a shadowed copse of
trees then rounding on her. “You were never supposed to be a part of this world, Felicity! The rest of
them, fine, but not you—never you!”

“Why not?” She asked, “What makes me so special? Tell me Bruce, because I’d really like to
know!”

He looked at her, opening his mouth to speak, but said nothing. Instead he reached for her,
unsnapping her seat belt before pulling her into his arms and kissing her.

His mouth was warm against hers and, despite the fact that she had a million and one reasons to pull
away from him, she melted into the kiss. Her fingers wrapped around his cowl and she felt the cold
metal of his armor against her fingertips as his warm tongue invaded her. The taste of him made her
moan and gasp. His gauntleted hand clutched the back of her head and he practically hauled her into
his lap, his other hand hitting a button causing the steering wheel to pull away.

She sat sideways in his lap, her feet lying in her now abandoned seat as the kiss softened and he
cressed her cheek with his gloved hand. She shivered at the feeling of the cold leather and metal
gauntlet against her rapidly warming skin. He made a growling noise deep in his throat before
pulling away from the kiss, his eyes searching hers.

“Invoke me in, Felicity,” he told her, his breath hot against her lips.

It was tempting, so very tempting. The scents of them surrounded her, nearly suffocating her in the
small space; his sweat, the scent of leather and gun oil, their pheromones and the wet heat of them
that steamed up the interior glass. She just wanted to forget her pain, just get lost in the moment. She
was so confused about what she felt for Oliver, what she felt for him...

Was it possible to love two men equally? Was it possible to want them both, need them both, even
though both men hurt and rejected her? Was it possible to crave someone so much and not trust them
with your heart?

Could she spend her life trapped between two worlds and remain intact?

His mouth, Bruce’s mouth, trailed down her throat as he sucked and nipped lightly at the sensitive
flesh. He brought his mouth close to her ear and whispered, “Just tell me you want this, want me.
Stop playing games and just give in to it.”

When she left Bruce four years ago she thought she had left all of it behind
… and then she met Oliver.

She swore she wouldn’t get involved
… until she did.

She swore she would only remain on the periphery
…and then she was the one who drew him back into the fight.

She swore she would never make the same mistakes with Oliver that she made with Bruce
…and then she took both men into her bed.

And now Bruce was kissing her and all she wanted to do was take him inside of her again, to feel wanted again. She wanted to feel loved even if it was a lie. Oliver had utterly rejected her and any chance they might have had. Even Bruce had offered her the chance to remain on his team but Oliver had exiled her from everything she had built over the last four years. He let her go, told her to move on.

Oliver told her to move on with Bruce.

His words echoed in her mind:

“I hate that it’s him. I hate that it has to be anyone else but me, but if he’s what makes you happy then you should be with him. I don’t like the guy and I probably never will, but I want you to be happy. You deserve to be loved, Felicity. You deserve to feel someone’s arms around you…I just wish they could be mine.”

She was in love with both men but only one of them was kissing her now.

Bruce.

It would always come back to Bruce.

“Tell me you want me,” Bruce whispered against her ear. “Come home with me and end this.”

Come home with me.

Home.

Home meant you were safe; home was where your heart was safe. Home was a place where you were loved unconditionally, where no ghosts and no secrets stood between you.

She wanted him but he wasn’t home. She didn’t have a home anymore.

She never did.

All she had were secrets, shadows, and ghosts.

It took everything she had to place her hands on his chest and pull away. “No,” she whispered raggedly.

“Why not?” He asked her, not releasing his hold. He kissed her again, briefly and tenderly. “Let me love you, Felicity.”

“That’s just it, Bruce,” she said, hating the catch in her voice. “You don’t love me and you never will. I’m just a challenge for you right now but the minute I let you in you’ll just push me away again.” She shook her head, “I deserve better than that and I’ll never get it from you.”

“Who then?” He asked in a hard tone, the tenderness leaving his voice as he let go of her, “Queen? That security agent?”

“Oliver doesn’t want me like that anymore,” Felicity dropped her gaze from his, unwilling to allow him to see her pain. “As for Jake, I don’t know but for the first time in my life someone…” She took another shaky breath and moved away from him until she was back in her own seat. She licked her lips, the taste of him lingering on them, and steadied herself as she used her bare hand to wipe the condensation from the glass of the passenger side window. “I deserve to be more than just some
warm body for you to get lost in, Bruce.”

“What exactly is it you want then?” He asked her, “What is it that you think this ‘Jake’ person can give you?”

“Nothing, that’s not the point!” She said, shutting her eyes tight, unwilling to shed even one more tear in front of this man. She turned and looked at him, “Do you know what happened when he took me to lunch? He talked to me, Bruce. He asked me questions and it wasn’t like an interrogation or feigned interest on his part, he wanted to know who I was; me,” she pointed her finger to her chest. “He learned more about me in twenty minutes than most people who’ve known me for years ever tried to learn. He didn’t force himself on me or treat me like I was a temporary diversion, he never even tried to do more than touch my hand, but he showed more interest in me than you or anyone else ever has.” She looked away from him again, “I don’t know if I’m built for normal or not but I know that when a stranger shows more interest in who you are as a person than someone who has…” She shook her head and pressed her forehead to the cold glass. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Just take me to the penthouse so I can call a cab.”

Bruce didn’t say anything and she didn’t turn to look at him again. He started the engine and they took off into the shadows once more.
Chapter Thirty-One

The tumbler roared through the old steel factory tunnels before arriving at the abandoned rail station under the Wayne Foundation Building. They’d spent the entire ride in tense silence and Felicity closed her eyes and allowed the rumble of the motor and the vibrations of the rough ride sooth her shattered nerves. The tumbler was remarkably quiet. It was soundproofed and warm so that all she could hear was the faint thrum of the motor. She shut her eyes and allowed herself to drift into a hazy space between dreams and reality, rocked to sleep by the uneven ground beneath the wheels.

She didn’t even notice they had stopped until she felt something touch her hair. She opened her eyes and looked over to Bruce whose expression was blank, his hands on the steering wheel. “We’re here,” he said, opening the doors. “Give me a few minutes to take a shower and change and then I’ll take you home.”

“I was going to work on Watchtower for a while first,” she said warily as she climbed out of the tumbler and scrubbed her hands over her arms. It was almost as cold down there as it had been on the rooftop; the only difference was there wasn’t any wind to cut through her meager layers down here. “It’s the reason I was headed this way to begin with.”

He walked over to the work area and had already taken off his cape and cowl when he gave her an assessing look, “You’re dead on your feet.”
“I’ll be fine,” she said although she really wished he had a coffee maker down there. A sudden image of them going through the drive-through at Starbucks in the tumbler popped into her head and she sighed. She walked over towards the workstation and looked at all the boxes neatly stacked to the side. “I need to get a move on installing this stuff before I start my new job on Wednesday.”

A flash of annoyance crossed his face when she mentioned the job but he didn’t make any comments about it. “It’ll be there tomorrow,” he told her as he quickly stripped off his armor and placed it on the mannequin on the far side of the work area. “You shouldn’t push yourself if you’re tired.”

“The great Bruce Wayne, a man famous for his ability to get by with less than a couple of hours of sleep a day, is telling me to not push myself just because I’m sleepy?” Felicity chuckled tiredly.

“You’re not me,” he told her as he stripped off the last of his armor and reached into a drawer near the cases for a soft pair of sweats. He put them on, not bothering with a shirt or shoes and motioned for her to follow. “Come on, let’s go upstairs so I can take a shower and you can warm up. We’ll catch a nap and then I’ll help you.”

“We’ll catch a nap?” She asked him askance.

He shot her a disparaging look, “You’re tired and I’m not going out again tonight so we might as well get some sleep. I am capable of sleeping beside someone without having sex with them or you can pick your own room, I don’t really care. I should warn you that most of the furniture has already been removed because of the decorators coming in on Tuesday so it’s my bed or the sofa in the office.”

“You didn’t cancel the decorators after I told you I couldn’t take the job?” She asked.

“You’re here to work on updating Watchtower in the middle of the night,” he pointed out. “That’s what I asked you to do, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but I told you I wasn’t going to be living here,” she said.

“The place needed updating anyway,” he told her. “It was…getting old.”

“Oh, okay,” she said uneasily. “Um, that reminds me; I had something to ask you…”

“Ask,” he told her.

Um,” she bit her lip. “You know what? Never mind, it’s not important.”

“Ask,” he ordered her.

“I was, um, wondering if you might consider letting me have the penthouse anyway?” She spat out quickly. “I’ll pay rent or you can just not pay me for the work on Watchtower in exchange since I can’t take Barbara’s spot—”

“Keep the apartment,” he told her gruffly.

“Really?” She asked uncertainly.

“I don’t care; I don’t really use it anyway,” he said in a casual, almost bored tone.

“Okay; good, that’s good. And I don’t suppose you’d be willing to do the gentlemanly thing and take the sofa?” She asked hopefully. The look he shot her told her all she needed to know on that subject. “ Didn’t think so.” She looked at the stack of boxes, her fingers itching to get into them
despite her exhaustion, but the words ‘warm’ and ‘nap’ were just a bit more tempting. “Screw it, let’s go,” she told him as she followed him into the elevator.

She let him place his hand on the small of her back as he led her into the elevator and didn’t even object when he tucked her into his side, allowing her to lean against him as she absorbed his body heat. She closed her eyes; now that the adrenalin from the alley had worn off she was quickly shutting down. By the time the lift slowed to a stop at the penthouse she was practically asleep on her feet.

“Come on,” he said in a surprisingly gentle tone as he led her out into his office and shut the hidden entrance to the alternate Batcave behind the false wall.

She moved to stand near the statuette of the Maltese Falcon and allowed her fingers to trail lovingly over the textured feathers as she stifled a yawn. She glanced over at Bruce and frowned as she noticed him staring at her with a strange look on his face, “What?”

“Nothing,” he grumbled then frowned. “What were you doing in the East End in the middle of the night when you’re practically swaying on your feet from exhaustion? Why weren’t you in bed?” He asked. “And don’t say it was just to work on Watchtower.”

“Tam, Tim, Luke, and my friend Sara all wanted to go to a club and I tagged along but it just wasn’t my thing,” she told him. “I figured since I was close to the penthouse anyway I might as well stop by and do some tinkering.”

“Sara?” He asked. “By Sara do you mean Black Canary?”

“Did Oliver tell you about her?” Felicity frowned.

“He told me about the Canary but he didn’t tell me her name; since she was the only other survivor from Queen’s boating accident I put two and two together.”

“And I just confirmed it,” Felicity sighed. “Oh well, it’s not like you wouldn’t have met her eventually anyway.”

“Are you sure you should be associating with her given that she could be the leak that exposed Queen’s entire operation?” He asked, his expression pure Bat for a moment even though he was naked except for a well washed pair of dark sweats.

“She’s not the leak,” Felicity said confidently.

He raised a questioning eyebrow slightly, “How do you know?”

“I asked her.”

“And you believe her?” He said skeptically.

“Yup,” she said, not willing to give any more details than that.

“I want to speak to her myself,” he told her.

“Go ahead,” she told him. “I’d hold off until tomorrow or Monday though. Right now she and Luke are probably testing the limits of the mattress springs in her hotel room and I’m pretty sure they won’t be up for an early morning interrogation.”

“She and Luke are involved?” Bruce scowled. “Queen didn’t mention that.”
“That’s because it’s a recent development; like today recent. She had dinner with my family and they hit it off big time.” Before he could interrupt with more scowls and Bat-ness she cut him off at the pass, “Look, Sara isn’t a part of this, okay? Besides, she’s going to Starling to meet with Oliver and he’ll handle it. This is Oliver’s business so just let it go.”

“She’s a mask in my city,” he told her with a stubborn set to his jaw. “I need to meet with her and find out what she’s doing here.”

“Visiting me,” she told him.

“Why?”

“Because she’s my friend! I am allowed to have at least one friend, you know.” She said with an eye roll. “Seriously Bruce, lighten up.”

“The Rochev woman threatened you and she’s connected,” he stated flatly.

“Isabel didn’t threaten me,” she said stifling another yawn. “All she did was offer me a job and then try to get in my pants.”

“Queen said she—” Bruce stopped abruptly and looked at her, “Did you just say that Isabel Rochev asked you to…?”

“Join the all-girls softball team? Yeah,” she said wryly. “Don’t worry, I let her down easy; she’s not really my type. Besides, I already promised Sara that if I ever decided to come up to bat then she’d be the first one on the pitcher’s mound.”

Bruce cleared his throat and ran his hand over his mouth as he gave her an uncertain look, “Still, I’d like to speak to Canary before she leaves town.”

“Sure, I’ll bring her by,” Felicity told him. “Now can we get out of here? I’d really like to change into something warmer and catch a nap.”

“Of course,” Bruce said, still looking strangely discomfited.

He led her into the master bedroom where a few racks of clothes were set aside neatly at the far end of the room along with several boxes and bags labeled ‘Killinger’s Department Store’ in bold blue and gold script. She walked over and started going through them. “I know I bought some nightgowns,” she muttered.

Bruce headed towards the master bath, “If you need something to wear there’s probably something of mine you can use in the drawers,” before disappearing into the en suite.

As she searched through the numerous bags and boxes she started to become more and more frustrated. Where were the jeans and sweaters she bought? The jackets? The camisoles and the rest of her lingerie? Although a lot of what she had purchased was there, none of the less formal wear was anywhere to be found. She’d have to call the personal shopper on Monday and find out what happened.

It was just frustrating, she thought miserably. Tomorrow she’d either have to trudge back home in her slutty magician’s assistant get up, in a borrowed pair of Bruce’s overly large sweats, or an evening gown; any of which would end with her being interrogated by her dad and Peggy Ann for God knows how long.

And this is why I definitely need my own place, she thought miserably.
With a sigh she turned to sort through Bruce’s things to find a shirt to borrow when she glanced around and noted the difference in the room now that all of the art had been removed in anticipation of the remodel. She’d been too tired to pay attention to it before but, without the influence of Sabine cluttering up the room; it was now much closer to her own tastes. The room now reminded her more of the Bruce she knew and not the playboy persona it had been intended for. There were some art deco and art nouveau pieces here and there but instead of the black enamel and steel she had found so objectionable in the rest of the rooms, this one reminded her more of the office.

That made sense, she thought. The only two rooms Bruce spent any real time in were that office and his bedroom so he would want to feel comfortable. That said, the furnishings were still very masculine and on a larger scale than most; the bed especially.

It was older than the rest of the furniture, obviously a family heirloom, and big. She’d be willing to bet it was even bigger than a king. Apparently the Wayne men all shared a large physique and she imagined Bruce had to have the mattress and sheets custom made to accommodate the intricately carved yet boldly masculine four poster bed of dark mahogany and burled wood. She recognized the Wayne family crest carved into the center of a large oval medallion in both the headboard and the footboard and saw the same symbol carved in a smaller medallion on both the large armoire and chest of drawers across the room. All the rest of the furniture was much newer, though still antique, and had been chosen to go with those three pieces.

As interesting as the antiques were, she was more interested in sleeping in the bed at that moment than she was in staring at it. She knew Bruce well enough to know that, although he was a tough guy, he wasn’t a martyr or a monk. He liked comfort. He wasn’t a slave to excess but if he had the sheets and bed custom made then they would be soft and of the highest quality possible. She looked at the thick mattress longingly and hoped the sheets had been recently changed because she was going to collapse into it the first chance she got. She yawned again and decided to abandon her clothes search until she made sure there were sheets on the bed. She pulled back the thick, dark navy and gold brocade duvet and was relieved to see that the sheets did, in fact, appear to be fresh.

“I have the maid service change the sheets every couple of days, whether they’ve been used or not, just in case I need to crash here,” Bruce said from the doorway of the bathroom. She turned to him and her eyes wandered over the tanned and scarred skin of his well-defined chest and abs, past the towel wrapped loosely and low around his hips to his rock hard thighs and calves, all the way to his large bare feet, then back up again. “Like what you see, Baby?” He asked with a smirk as her eyes met his on the way back up.

“Fishing for compliments?” She shot back.

His grin deepened, “Should I be?”

She shook her head in exasperation, “You’re a Greek god Bruce, but right now the only thing I’d like to see is the back of my eyelids,” she told him.

“Scottish actually, with a smidgen of French and German, but the compliment is still appreciated.” His lips curled upwards slightly and he padded over to the large armoire. “I’ll look and see what I have since you don’t appear to have found anything yet.”

“Yeah, it’s weird,” she said. “I could have sworn I bought twice that many clothes. I know I bought some jeans and sweaters. Plus I had lingerie…”

Bruce reached into the drawer and held out a delicate lace bra for her inspection.

“Isn’t that a little small for you?” She asked with a raised eyebrow. “No offence, but your boobs are
much bigger than that.”

“Funny. I think I found your missing clothes,” Bruce said putting it back. “Apparently one of the maids must have started to unpack. Why they didn’t get to the rest of it I don’t know.”

“I do,” she said feeling stupid. “That’s the stuff that I had to have altered. The rest of it must have come in earlier in the day when housekeeping was here.” She moved over to the chest of drawers and took out a long jersey knit nightgown. “Thank God, I will be so glad to get out of this outfit; you have no idea.” She muttered as she tossed the gown on the bed and began to take off her coat to hang it up before she went into the bathroom. As she shrugged the bright red wool trench off her shoulders she noticed a dark splatter of blood near the hem. “Great! I have junkie blood all over my new coat,” she scowled. “Do you have any soda water or peroxide?” She asked, looking up at him.

Bruce stood next to the oversized armoire, a soft pair of flannel pajama bottoms in his hand as he stared at her, “What are you wearing?”

She flushed and glanced down at her dress, “Yeah, I know. Believe me, it was all Tam’s idea. I look like I should be serving drinks at the Magic Castle. Personally, I wanted to wear—” Her sentence was cut off abruptly as Bruce crossed the room in less than a blink of an eye and began kissing her.

She dropped the coat on the floor as her hands wrapped around his neck, reveling in the feel of his warm moist flesh. Despite what she had told him in the tumbler she felt herself responding to his kisses. Her exhaustion disappeared as her hands traced the hard muscles of his back and suddenly she wanted to get out of her clothes for a completely different reason.

It was crazy, this was getting ridiculous, she thought; but that didn’t stop her from going along with it. Had she the ability to think logically she might have reminded herself that this sort of thing had happened to her repeatedly and had yet to end on a positive note…unless orgasms counted as a ‘positive note’, in which case there had been multiple positives, all of which had been highly satisfying thus far. While the toe-curling endorphin rush of such activities buttered her muffin quite thoroughly, it was enduring the angst and arrogance that followed the multiple positives that tended to suck. Still, had she been in charge of her wits, she would have probably taken herself out of that room and camped out in front of the fireplace in the office or called a cab. Or, on the other hand, she might have gone the other direction and said ‘screw it’. She might have thought, ‘Hey, Tam and Sara are right; why shouldn’t I strut out of my rut? Who’s to say I’m not the one using Bruce for a quickie right now? Why shouldn’t she, quote, ‘Hop on top and enjoy the moment,’ while getting a little scandal of her own going for a change?’

Had she been capable of rational thought, any and all of those points might have filtered through her consciousness but, at that moment, all she could think about was the look on Bruce’s face, the sheer need displayed so openly in an expression of want, on a countenance that was normally so stoic and grim that he was now almost unrecognizable as the man most people except her ever got to see.

His hand slipped between them and pulled at her buttons, undoing them quickly before slipping the dress over her shoulders and onto the floor. He looked down at her and his eyes grew even darker. Taking a small step back, he looked her up and down slowly, his hand reaching out to tenderly trace the path his eyes had taken.

His fingers gently drew over her collar bones, lingering just for a moment over the small faint scar on her shoulder, across the swell of her modestly proportioned but shapely breasts made prominent by the black lace push up bra, down her stomach, skimming over the depression of her navel to her garter belt before his eyes met hers again.

Reaching out with his other hand he cupped her cheek and pulled her closer, kissing her softly. As
his kiss deepened, his arms wrapped around her, drawing her into his embrace. His fingers found the clasp of her bra and unsnapped it, tugging the straps down her arms and allowing it to join the rest of her clothes. He walked them backwards until he was sitting on the bed, his towel having been tossed aside when she wasn’t paying attention to anything but the feel of his mouth on hers.

She looked between them at the evidence of his desire and her breath caught as heat rose from her center. His mouth latched onto one of her breasts as she stood between his thighs, his tongue and teeth teasing her nipple as he sought out the tabs on her garter and unsnapped them. His fingers teased the skin on her thighs, brushing across the swell of her bottom through the lace panties, before he undid the garter belt and let that drop as well. He stood up and reversed their position until she was the one on the bed and laid her backwards until she was looking up at him. He picked up one silk covered leg and placed it on his chest, his eyes never leaving hers even when he paused to kiss the inside of her ankle gently before removing her shoe and dropping it to the floor. His fingers ran down both sides of her leg, teasing the sensitive skin and causing her to jump slightly. He grinned at her before hooking his fingers under the lace at the top of her thigh and easing the delicate netting down until her leg was bare. He repeated the process with her other leg, this time leaning in to kiss the inside of her knee when he was done, leaving her clad only in the black lace panties.

He leaned over her and kissed her again, easing her up the bed until they were both fully off the floor and her head was resting against one of the pillows. He settled over her and kissed down the side of her neck pausing to breathe in her perfume sharply, then down to her breasts where he kissed her nipple, his lips just skimming the tight peak in a kiss that was simultaneously chaste and erotic, down to her stomach where he placed a sucking kiss just under her navel, and then he settled himself between her thighs and ran his tongue over the sheer lace of her panties. She shut her eyes and moaned as she felt his tongue trace over the floral pattern on her underwear, skimming over the sensitive flesh before tugging them off and casting the tiny scrap of material aside.

He looked down at her, his face still, his eyes dark, before settling back between her thighs and placing his mouth on her center. She arched into his questing tongue, her fingers carding through his damp, dark hair as she squirmed under his loving ministrations. He took his time, his hands holding her thighs apart as he licked, sucked, and nibbled at her until she was nearly sobbing with need. Just when she thought she would go insane with pleasure he stopped and moved up the bed to kiss her deeply. She whimpered as his tongue swept through her mouth, his hard flesh nudging at her sex but he didn’t enter. Instead, he continued to kiss her before leaving her lips to kiss along her cheek and then took her earlobe between his teeth and began to suck and worry it with his teeth. She cried out and shivered, her legs coming around him as her hands pulled at his back urging him to come inside of her but still he held back.

“Bruce, please!” She begged.

“Please what?” He said softly against her ear, the warmth of his breath causing her to shiver again. “Tell me what you want, Baby.”

“I want you,” she said with a stuttering breath.

He entered her slowly and she moaned as he filled her, stretched her. He took her mouth in a deep kiss as he pushed forward then fell into a slow, languid rhythm. “Tell me you want this; that you’re mine,” he said softly against her lips.

The minute she heard the words through the fog of desire that had her under its spell she’d felt it begin; the panic, the knowledge of what came next. She moved to silence his demands with a kiss but he jerked his hips sharply inside of her causing her to cry out, her head pressing hard into the pillow as he nipped at the line of her exposed throat.
“Say it, Baby,” he told her. “Tell me you belong with me.”

She stiffened despite the pleasure she had been feeling and her blood ran cold as she felt the panic again begin to rise in her chest and pull her away from whatever momentum she had been building toward orgasm.

_Tell me you belong with me._

I can’t do this, she thought. It’s too soon; I can’t go through this again, not again.

“I—” Her breath hiccupped and she shut her eyes tight then pushed against his chest with a sob. “No!”

She couldn’t do this anymore; she couldn’t do this. Those words cut through her like a knife; words that had been spoken before. It was like they were following a script or something and her mind, so tired and stressed by everything that had happened since all of this had begun, just couldn’t ignore them this time. That Albert Einstein quote “Insanity was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results,” sprang to mind and she realized that’s what she had been doing this entire time. She knew exactly how this ended, how it would end...

Oh God, she was such a fool, such a complete and total idiot! No wonder they kept playing cat and mouse with her.

“Felicity, what’s wrong?” He asked with a frown as she covered her face with her hands and began to tremble.

She rolled onto her side as he moved his weight off of her and buried her face in the pillow under her head. She felt him as he pressed against her from behind, his hand rubbing her shoulder soothingly as she continued to shake. “Felicity, what’s wrong?” He repeated in a sharper tone. “Tell me what’s the matter.”

She couldn’t answer him as the exhaustion and stress finally caught up with her. Six months of sleepless nights, of nightmares that had her waking up in a sweat, of this ‘thing’, of Oliver and Bruce and those damn words that seemed to follow her everywhere she turned; all of it, all at once, it all seemed to tear through her like a knife.

She heard the words spoken in different voices echoing in her head:

_You belong to me._

How many times would she put herself through this? How many times could her heart take this much pain before it destroyed her?

This many times, she thought. This was it, she’d reached the end. She couldn’t do this again; not again. Not anymore, not like this!

“Baby, are you hurt?” He asked her, his voice gaining in volume as her trembling increased. He rolled her back over and pulled her hands from her face, looking at her ashen features and tear filled eyes with a hint of panic in his expression. “Did those punks hurt you?” He looked down her body, his hands casting over her flesh in a way that was more clinical than loving. “I don’t see any marks; did they have a syringe? Were you injected with something? Baby, answer me! Did they have a needle?!”

“No,” she said in a harsh half-sob as she shook her head jerkily, hot tears tracking down her face. She tried to cover her face with her hands again but he wouldn’t let her.
His hands cupped her cheeks and he forced her to look at him. She closed her eyes tight and he stroked her temples with his fingertips, “It’s okay, Baby; it’s just the stress catching up to you. Just breathe, okay?”

“It’s not—it’s not that,” she hiccupped as she tried to control her breathing.

“What then, Baby; what’s wrong?”

She opened her eyes to look at him. He stared down at her, his brow furrowed and his panicked gaze filled with confusion and concern. She felt her face crumple as more tears clogged her throat. She was so tired; God, she was tired.

Why did she keep letting him in? Why?

Because you’re in love with him, came the traitorous voice in her head. You’re in love with a man who will never love you back. Neither of them will ever love you back.

She’d allowed herself to become the woman Isabel Rochev once accused her of being: A weak-willed pushover who knowingly gave her body and her power to a man who was only using her as a toy. She had become the kind of woman she, herself, had nothing but contempt for.

What was it Barbara said about Laurel when she’d relayed her and Oliver’s history?

“I never could understand women who get all tangled up in toxic relationships…”

Talk about karma kicking you in the teeth.

Shame suffused her entire being. Oliver had rejected her and Bruce only wanted her for what was between her legs. This is what she had become. She wasn’t a victim. No one made her this; it was all on her. She let them in.

She let them in. She did this to herself.

“What happened? Just tell me what happened,” he said softly.

Why did he keep coming back? If he didn’t want her then why wouldn’t he just leave her alone? Why did she keep letting him in knowing how this always ended?

“Why?” She asked him, hating how pathetic she sounded but needing to know the truth.

“Why what?” He asked her as he stroked her hair.

“Why are you doing this? Why me?” She asked him tremulously. “Why do you keep…” she covered her face with her hands and this time he let her. “Why do you keep making me fall in love with you and then hu-hurt me? Why do this; why ask me if I belong with you when you always l-leave? Why do you keep coming back? Why can’t you just leave me alone?” She sobbed pitifully. The room grew silent and she felt his hands still against her hair.

“Baby,” he said at last, his voice thick with emotion. “Open your eyes and look at me.” She felt him tug gently at her hands. “Please.”

Reluctantly she allowed him to pull her hands away and she looked up at him, her cheeks red with humiliation. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m just…I’m just tired. I’m so sorry. I-I haven’t been sleeping well…I can go; I should go. I’m sorry, I j-just need to go.” She tried to get up but he held her tight and she felt more tears escape the corners of her eyes. “Please let me go, Bruce. Please,” she
begged. “Don’t—don’t make me…” she couldn’t look at him. Her stomach burned and her nose began to run. She wiped at it with her hand and wished she had a tissue. “Just let me go, okay? Please, I just need to go.”

“I don’t want you to go, Baby.” He used his used his thumb to wipe her tears away before speaking, “Don’t leave, and don’t apologize,” he said, his lips pressing against her temple. “I’m the one who owes you an apology,” He leaned his forehead against hers and took a deep breath. “I’m so sorry for hurting you and I promise, I swear to you, I’m not going to leave you again. I’m here, Baby; I’m not leaving you again.”

“Don’t—just please don’t…” She started to pull away again but he held her firmly, his head still touching hers.

He shut his eyes tight, “I’m not leaving,” he told her again. “This doesn’t end when the sun comes up this time, I swear.”

“Don’t say that,” she said pleadingly and shut her eyes against the tears which kept falling as she prayed for the world to open up and swallow her whole. “You’re going to leave; you always leave.”

He lifted his head and looked down at her, “Baby, I’m not leaving, I promise. I should have never left the first time. I should have followed my instincts and come after you four years ago. I made so many mistakes Baby, too many, but I swear to you I won’t be repeating them; not this time.”

“You don’t mean it,” she told him weakly. “You say that now and then tomorrow you’ll tell me we can’t be together and—and—“ she took a sobbing breath. “I’m just so tired of this!” She cried. “I’m just so tired of being left behind; I’m tired of being alone!”

She began to cry in earnest then and he gathered her into his arms and began to rub her back as he made soothing noises, “You’re not alone, Baby. I’m here and I’m not leaving; not anymore.” He kissed her through her tears, his mouth clinging to hers as he rolled her onto her back and settled between her thighs once more.

“I’m not leaving,” he told her as he slowly pressed inside. “I’m not going to leave,” he repeated as she clung to him.

He made love to her slowly, tenderly; his lips kissing away her tears and his voice soothing her with sweet promises as he moved inside of her until the overwhelming misery she had felt was replaced by the first stirrings of pleasure. Over and over he thrust slowly inside, each time with a promise on his lips, until they both shuddered into one another.

When they were done she shut her eyes, vaguely aware of his getting out of bed to retrieve a warm washcloth for her. She watched sleepily as he bathed her thighs and sex gently before climbing into the bed with her, enfolding her into his arms, and whispering, “Go to sleep, Baby; I’m here and everything’s going to be okay.”

She shut her eyes and drifted and as her dreams began to flash before her she heard a soft voice far in the distance say, “I love you.”

She awoke the next day feeling groggy and achy, not to mention a bit hung over. Crying always did that to her. She pressed her face into her warm firm pillow and realized that it was Bruce’s chest. She looked up blearily to see him smiling down at her.

“Good morning,” he said quietly.
She flushed as memories of what had happened between them returned with full force and not the good ones either. She sat up in bed abruptly and immediately regretted it as her brain felt like it sprang a leak. “Morning,” she mumbled pressing the heel of her hand against the throbbing ache in her forehead. “Um, do you have any aspirin?”

“In the bathroom,” he told her. “Wait here,” he got out of bed and walked naked into the bathroom without a hint of shame. Even through the haze of pain Felicity couldn’t help but admire the play of muscles across his shoulders not to mention the rest of him.

Damn. That man’s ass really did belong in a museum.

She groaned in pain and embarrassment as she remembered breaking down like an idiot the night before. She was pretty sure she dripped snot and drool all over him to boot.

Kill. Me. Now, she thought. Maybe she’d get lucky and the headache was an aneurism or some kind of fast acting tumor brought on by too much cell phone use.

“You’re not dying,” he told her wryly as he held out a glass of water and a large tablet.

“Sorry, sometimes I speak what I’m thinking out loud without realizing it,” she muttered.

“I know,” he told her. “We’ve met, remember?”

“Funny.” She took the water and the pill and frowned, “One? Are you kidding? This is at least a three tablet headache.”

“It’s eight hundred milligram prescription strength Ibuprofen,” he told her. “Besides, at your body weight you shouldn’t be ODing on over the counter pain meds anyway.” She swallowed the pill downed the water quickly, finishing the entire glass in a few swallows, “Are you okay?”

“Just dehydrated,” she told him. She barely had half a glass of a fruity cocktail with an umbrella in it and she wound up hung-over because of a crying jag. How much suck could one person take? She cleared the hoarseness from her throat and glanced over at him, her cheeks on fire. “Bruce, about last night…”

“I told you, you have nothing to be embarrassed about,” he said firmly as he sat next to her on bed, climbing back under the covers so he could face her while leaning against the headboard. “We do need to talk though. I think we need to clarify a few things between us, don’t you?”

She licked her lips and spoke quickly, “Bruce, you don’t have to say anything. I was just really tired and I haven’t been sleeping well so if you just want to forget about it, I understand. I—” She closed her eyes and grimaced, “Just—look, I know that I said some stuff and you said some stuff but it’s okay; it’s just,” she rubbed her hand over her eyes wearily and drew her knees protectively up to her chest, “it’s been a very bad couple of days and I guess it all just caught up to me and…God, I wish I could just curl up and fucking die right now.”

“Stop,” he told her as he reached for her hand. “I don’t want to forget about last night and, like I told you, you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I, um, I wish that was true,” she chuckled nervously. She ran her free hand through her tangled air and looked at him sheepishly, “Listen, I know you don’t do,” she held her breath and blew it out sharply as she gestured at their hands that were clasped together, “this, and that’s fine. I’m not pushing for anything, honestly, and we can just get dressed and have a do-over, okay?”

“What if I’m the one pushing and the last thing I want is a do-over?” He asked quietly.
She turned to him with a wry grimace, “Bruce…you’re just feeling guilty and while I appreciate it —”

“I don’t do guilt,” he told her firmly.

“Please,” she said sardonically, “all of you masks use guilt like a SUV drinks gas; it’s what you run on.”

“I don’t do guilt; I do anger.” Leaning forward, he narrowed his eyes at her. “And since you aren’t hearing me, let me be very clear: I do not regret last night and I don’t intend to give you any more speeches about how much danger you’d be in if we were together. Trouble follows you whether I’m there or not so you might as well stick around where I can, at the very least, keep an eye on you. As for us, I want us to be in a committed monogamous relationship, hopefully one that involves you waking up in my bed from here on out; does that clear things up for you?”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow, “The other day you said—”

“I know what I said,” he told her. He scrubbed his hand through his hair and released her hand as he propped himself against the headboard and pillows again and gave her an almost sheepish look, “I’m…look, the truth is that I’ve been the Bat for almost half my life and I’ve run Wayne Enterprises for just as long and I tend to think and act like…”

“An ass?” She supplied helpfully.

“I was going to say like a ‘businessman or a vigilante in my personal life as well’ but ‘ass’ sums it up nicely,” he grimaced. “I’m used to getting things my own way and, if that doesn’t happen, I either force my opponent to bend to my will or I negotiate for the best deal.”

“So, when you told me that you didn’t want a relationship you were negotiating with me?” She asked scratching behind her ear and wrinkling her nose in confusion.

“You’re not the only one who feels socially awkward in certain situations,” he said as he cleared his throat. He looked down at the deep blue duvet cover and scowled, “I’m not very good at this sort of thing. I’ve been in relationships before but I’ve never actually been in this kind of…situation. I mean, I’ve been with plenty of women; dozens in fact—”

“Yeah, you really are bad at this,” Felicity said under her breath.

He gave her a sharp look, “Can we just get through this please without the running commentary?”

“Sorry,” she told him. “Carry on.”

“Thank you. As I was saying,” he shot her a look, “the closest thing I’ve ever had to a…long-term relationship was with Selina and, well, she…”

“Was a part-time bad guy?” Felicity offered.

“She was never bad, per se; she wasn’t exactly on the side of the angels but she didn’t…”

“Kill people?” She finished for him.

He closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly, “Would you please stop doing that?”

“Just trying to help,” she muttered.

His lips tightened and he grimaced, “You can be absolutely exasperating, you know that?”
She shrugged, “I’ve heard worse.” His lips twitched and he pulled her over to him and kissed her deeply. When he finally surfaced for air she blinked at him muzzily and whispered, “What was that for?”

“I was hoping it would shut you up,” he told her with a smirk.

“Shutting up now,” she said breathlessly.

He tucked her into his side and laid back with her head on his bare chest and his lips nuzzling the top of her hair. His arm was around her, holding her in a half-embrace, as his fingers danced over her side. “Selina and I were never…it wasn’t like this,” he said at last. “I think we were both far too independent for anything more and, when I pushed it, she left. I don’t really blame her; I kept trying to change her, save her, but she didn’t need saving. She kept warning me to back off and I screwed up. Looking back, I can’t really blame her. I wanted her to accept my rules and way of doing things but I wasn’t willing to compromise in return. She left and, after a while, I stopped looking. Besides, I had the mission and I didn’t have time to chase down someone who didn’t want to be found.”

“Is that why you didn’t come after me?” Felicity asked. His arm tightened around her and she looked up at him, “Last night…you said you thought about it but…”

“No.” There was a grim edge to his tone, one different from that of the Bat. She looked at him and saw the pain etched in the deep grooves beside his mouth. He glanced down at her and smiled softly but it didn’t reach his eyes. They were so filled with suffering and pain she knew exactly who he was thinking about.

Bruce was a man driven by grim purpose, and while he was not a happy-go-lucky kind of guy, only one thing ever had the power to bring him low.

Family.

“Damian,” she supplied gently.

He nodded slightly, “Barbara told you?” He asked in a deceptively neutral tone.

“A bit,” she said. “Not a lot, but enough to know that Damian was, um, difficult.”

He snorted, “Damian was a sociopath,” he said humorlessly. “Ten years old and he had already murdered who knows how many people. Talia,” he spat her name out like a curse, “raised him to be a killer, a monster, and then unleashed him on me and my team like a gift wrapped bomb left on the doorstep just waiting to be opened.”

“Talia was the woman who…” she hesitated, “She was his mother?”

Bruce took a pained breath, “If you can call what she was a mother, then yes.”

“And you were, um, romantically involved?” She asked hesitantly.

“No,” he said flatly. “Oh, we had sex a few times but that was years before Damian was conceived and romance was never part of the equation.”

She frowned, “Then how?” At his pained and angry expression she laid her hand on his chest gently.

“Bruce, we don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to.”

“No, I need to tell you,” he said, placing his hand over hers and squeezing it reassuringly. “It’s important you know all of it before we go any further, okay?”
Despite the subject matter at hand part of her couldn’t help but feel hopeful by the way he’d phrased that. “Okay.”

“Talia was Ra’s al Ghul’s daughter.”

“Another one?” Felicity asked. At Bruce’s curious look she said, “We met Nyssa a couple of years ago down in Starling City.”

“In connection with Canary?” Bruce asked. “Queen mentioned she was once a member of the League.”

“Yeah,” Felicity said slowly. “Sort of, yeah, you could say that.”

“Felicity,” he said in the rumble of the Bat despite the fact that he was still running his fingers gently along her bare hip under the covers.

“She and Nyssa were…together.”

“They were lovers?” He asked but she could tell he was a bit caught off guard by that revelation.

“A bit more than that,” she told him. “What they shared was closer to a marriage actually. Sara and Nyssa were bound together both as assassins and as a couple; they made vows to one another. It was, quite literally, ‘til death do us part and Sara couldn’t take the killing anymore so she tried to kill herself using venom so that Nyssa wouldn’t go after her family in retaliation. Nyssa released her from her vows and allowed Oliver to administer an antidote in order to save her life and freed her from her service to the League. She went back to her after the Blood Army thing a couple of years ago but she returned to Starling when…” She stopped abruptly.

“When what?” Bruce asked with a frown.

Felicity shrugged, “It, um, it was just a case. Something came up and we needed help so she came back.”

“Six months ago?” Bruce asked her.

“Yeah,” Felicity shivered, speaking quietly but didn’t expand on it.

“What happened?” He asked her in a hushed tone.

“Lots of stuff,” she told him. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Baby…”

“Please?” She pleaded, her eyes catching his. “Don’t…I’m just not ready to talk about it, okay? Someday I will, just…just not now.”

His muscles tensed and he swallowed as he looked down at her, his mind obviously playing through all of the possibilities. “Did you…did anyone hurt you?”

She buried her face in his neck and breathed in the scent of his aftershave, “I don’t want to talk about it. I can’t…I can’t talk about it yet,” she said, trembling with the aftershocks of fear from that night as she heard the voice of Slade in the back of her mind:

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“All you have now is me; I’m all you’ve ever had, love.”
“If someone hurt you then I need to know.” He waited for her to speak for several beats but she didn’t say anything. “Baby, please; just talk to me. What happened six months ago?”

She took a shaky breath and he felt another shiver go through her, “It was a case; just a bad case. It’s over now and it…it’s done. That’s all you need to know.”

“Felicity,” he bit out harshly.

“Please,” she said pleadingly, her arms tightening around him.

His jaw clenched and he ran his hand over her silken curls, “Did anyone hurt you? Just tell me that much and I promise I’ll drop it; at least for now.”

“I want you to know that I would have never laid so much as a harsh finger on your beautiful skin…”

“…From this moment on, you will always be safe, love; you will be cherished, protected, and you will always belong to me.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to calm her fast beating heart, “No, no one…I wasn’t hurt.”

“But they tried?” She pulled away from him slightly and he tightened his arms around her, “Please Baby, I need to know if you could still be in danger.”

Again, she took a moment to gather her thoughts, “No one is coming for me.”

“How do you know?” He asked, his eyes searching her face.

“You’re all alone in this world, sweet. The only person who will ever come for you is me.”

“He’s dead.” The words were spoken so faintly he could barely hear her. “He’s never coming back.”

Bruce took a deep breath and seemed to struggle with himself for a moment before finally allowing the tension to ease from his muscles, “Fine, but when you’re ready to talk about it then I’m ready to listen, okay?” She nodded against him silently and he pressed a kiss to her forehead, “Has Sara told you anything about Ra’s?” He said as he mentally filed that information away.

“No,” she said honestly. “I learned some things about him through my work on Team Arrow but even Sara didn’t know much before that. I do know that he’s kind of a misogynist, which is weird when you consider the fact that he named his daughter as his heir.”

“Nyssa named herself heir,” he said contemptuously, “and calling Ra’s a misogynist is an understatement. He tried to use his own daughters as brood mares to bring about the coming of his male successor.”

Her expression twisted in a mixture of horror and disgust, “You don’t mean he—”
“No,” Bruce said. “Ra’s is many things but he’s not a pedophile nor is he into incest. In fact, to many
people he’s a visionary; a savior. That’s what makes him so dangerous. In the beginning he was a
good man but the years and his use of the Lazarus Pits have eroded his sanity and created an evil
within him that rivals the corruption he believes he’s fighting against.”

“Lazarus Pits?” She asked, keeping her expression neutral.

Bruce leaned his head back and bumped it softly against the headboard, “It’s…a very long story.”
He sighed, “The Lazarus Pits are these natural occurring chemical pools that appear to be located
along ley lines all over the world, the waters of which have the ability to heal and rejuvenate any
injury up to, and including, death as long as you get the person to them fast enough. They also have
the ability to turn back the hands of time and restore youth to the bather depending on how long
they’re submerged.”

“The Fountain of Youth?” Felicity said skeptically even though she had already heard a similar story
from Miranda. At least she knew the other woman was at least telling the truth about that now that
she had confirmation from Bruce. “And let me guess; Ra’s real name is Ponce de Leon or, better yet,
Herodotus.”

“He’s not quite old enough to be Herodotus but, from what we’ve been able to ascertain, Ra’s is
between 450 and 700 years old,” Bruce said without a hint of humor in his tone.

“Oh-kay,” Felicity said slowly. She sat back at examined his expression carefully, “And you believe
that? You know for sure that this isn’t just crazy talk; you have proof?”

He nodded, “I…used the waters myself,” he told her at last.

“What?” Felicity said in surprise, “But you don’t—” She stopped and looked at him carefully.

They had made love on three separate occasions since he’d come back into her life but, each time
they’d come together, it had been in a rush and there had been no time for tenderness or slow
exploration. Now that she had the opportunity to, she examined him carefully. She straightened up
and sat on her knees facing him, not caring as the covers fell away revealing her naked flesh, and
began to trace the many wounds and scars time had left on his chest, arms, and torso. Unlike Oliver,
Bruce rarely trained shirtless (caves weren’t conducive to that sort of thing and he preferred to train
suited up or in workout gear) so all her memories of his body came from their one weekend four
years previously. It was enough that she knew many of the scars he bore were new and the ones that
weren’t were significantly muted or gone altogether.

The tips of her breasts, hard from the chill of the room, brushed against him as she leaned forward,
placing one hand flat on his chest for balance so she could look at the back of his upper arm.
Carefully, she ran the fingers of her other hand along where the scar from the wound he’d received
the night he took her for the first time should be. His mouth dipped to kiss her shoulder as his hands
ran down her spine to gently rest on her bottom but she was too distracted by what she found to
appreciate it.

Or rather, what she didn’t find.

“It’s gone,” she said quietly, a strange sadness filling her heart.

He nodded against the curve of her neck, the stubble on his cheeks causing her skin to erupt in
goosebumps, “It happened after you left.”

She sat back and looked at his face, her eyes searching it for any changes. Despite the fact that Bruce
was far too ruggedly handsome to ever be considered a ‘pretty boy’, he was always remarkably fit and well preserved due to clean living and a strict regimen of diet and exercise. He didn’t smoke, rarely drank, eschewed drugs unless absolutely necessary, and avoided foods that would slow him down or were overly rich. When they were together the first time he barely looked thirty despite the fact that he was seventeen years older than she was. Even though he was almost forty-one he still looked at least a decade younger than his actual age. She hadn’t noticed it until she had a chance to really look at him but…

Taking his face in her hands, she ran her fingertips over the corners of his eyes and frowned softly, “I remember when we were together tracing the lines here. They were barely there but I remember thinking how handsome they made you look. Laugh lines,” she smiled at him as she caressed the delicate skin there gently. “I knew they were probably from stress or from squinting too much while you were in the cowl but I wanted them to be laugh lines anyway.” Her fingers moved his cheek to trace the lines around his mouth, still deep and defined, but less so then she remembered and her eyes threatened to fill with tears. “They’re gone,” she sniffled sadly.

He pulled her into his embrace and kissed her tenderly, “Since you’ve been gone I haven’t had a lot of opportunities to laugh or smile,” he said against her lips. He pulled her towards him until she was sitting across his lap and curled up onto his chest, then pulled the covers back around her to keep her warm as he held her gently. “If you had been around then maybe there would have been laugh lines on my face by now; that or worry lines,” he joked lightly then kissed her forehead. He rubbed his chin against her hair and she hummed happily.

He took a deep breath, his voice going from soft and loving to a familiar grim cadence, “After my experience with the Lazarus Pits I had some equipment from Wayne BioTech sent to the Batcave to see what had happened. Near as Alfred and I can figure, I’ve lost, or gained rather, ten to fifteen years give or take. There’s no way of being sure exactly how many years of damage have been reversed or if there are side effects related to the process that will manifest later, but all the injuries and scar tissue I’ve received within the last ten years or so are gone and many of my older scars have either faded or disappeared altogether. We took x-rays and found that even my internal surgical scars have disappeared from when Bane broke my back. It’s as though it had never happened. Also the blood test showed that, not only was my blood stream free of toxins, but it was as though I had been through some kind of hemoperfusion. My blood was better oxygenated, my reflexes and strength improved, and my stamina increased. I was…fine, more than fine; physically at least. On the bright side the cartilage in my knees, hips, and shoulders grew back, but for a while I was…less than stable. Luckily I snapped out of it but, for a while, I was,” he exhaled a pent up breath, “the only word that fits is ‘dangerous’. My aggression, my rage, it increased ten-fold; I was out of control. When I found the Heretic,” a darkness came over him and he met her eyes briefly, “that’s the…he’s the one who killed Damian. When I found him, I very nearly killed him with my bare hands.”

“Are you sure that wasn’t just grief?” She asked him as she wrapped her arm around his shoulder and played idly with his dark hair, rumpled from sleep.

“Part of it was,” he admitted, “but the waters had a significant role in my mental instability. I was driven nearly insane and that was after being submerged for only a few minutes. Ra’s has been using the Pits for centuries and the effect it’s had on his thought processes is substantial.”

“How did you…” she began, allowing her voice to trail off.

“I was injured; a potentially fatal wound through my chest,” he told her. “Ra’s didn’t want me to die so he placed me in the Pit to heal my injuries.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion as she laid her hand over his heart as though to reassure herself that
“Not that I’m not grateful, but if the two of you are enemies; why would he do that?”

“That’s what I was building up to,” he said a bit uncomfortably. “There’s a lot we don’t know about Ra’s, but here’s what we do know: Ra’s is obsessed with creating a perfect world; a world without the evil of men. He believes the best way to bring about the new world is to eliminate the corrupt by razing entire cities like burning a cornfield to rid it of rats all in one go. The Pits induce hallucinations and Ra’s has come to believe them to be visions; prophesies. In one of his early ‘visions’ he saw a world free of the evil around him and he dedicated himself to that cause. As the years passed and he began to find and use more of the Pits, the visions changed and expanded to show that he was destined to produce a male heir who would one day inherit and rule this new world.”

He ran his nails gently down her back and she shivered closer into his chest, “He gathered his followers around him, an army of men dedicated to the idea of a world without evil, and he began to pull down cities, wipe out entire civilizations he felt were corrupt, and seek out the most beautiful, the most unique women he could find to give him the heir promised to him by the gods.”

“Sounds like a fairy tale,” she mused.

“It wasn’t,” he said flatly. “All of the women he took as his ‘consorts’ produced female children which he found unacceptable. Despite having advanced medical knowledge, he thought the women were at fault, not him. In the beginning he’d rid himself of his ‘mistakes’ only to move on from woman to woman in search of his true heir.”

“Wait; he’d murder his own children?” She asked in horror.

“We don’t know,” he admitted. “Possibly; in fact it’s probable in the case of deformity or birth defects. That’s just supposition based on the actions of others, and not his own. From what our research could uncover, the few children born to him that we could track down, besides Nyssa and Talia, appear to have been stillborn or to have died shortly after birth. His repeated usage of the pits seemed to affect his offspring in devastating ways, something chromosomal most likely and, in Ra’s case, most of the mothers all died in childbirth.”

“Wait; you’re okay, right?” Felicity asked worriedly. “Did you think to check out…? I mean, I know you don’t want any kids but, um…” She bit her lip and looked downwards pointedly, “still.”

He gave her an amused look, “I’m fine, luckily. We ran tests on that as well, trust me. I’m willing to sacrifice a lot for the mission but I’m still a man and there are some things even I’m not willing to put on the chopping block; my balls chiefly among them. We sent samples off to the lab just to make sure. Sperm count is fine as is my entire reproductive system and no chromosomal irregularities that they could see. I was only exposed to the Pits for a few minutes; any more than that I may not have been.”

He grew introspective again and his voice deepened, “Like I said, it may have something to do with his repeated exposure to the Pits, but there is something intrinsically wrong with that entire bloodline; with their souls or lack thereof. The only word for it is twisted. Whether that’s nature, nurture, or a byproduct of Pit Madness, who knows? We do know that Talia and Nyssa are his only surviving children that he openly acknowledges. We also know that they each tried to secure a place in their father’s affections by eliminating anyone they saw as a potential rival for his favor, including each other for a time; Talia especially. She would kill any woman she even suspected was carrying her father’s potential heir.”

“That’s sick,” she said with a furrowed brow. “The whole thing is sickening. So these ‘pits’; what else do you know about them?”
He shrugged slightly, “Well, we do know that each Pit can only be used once and only if the bather is gravely injured or ill. If a healthy person enters the waters they die instantly. Ra’s, when he reaches the end of his life cycle or when he’s injured, travels from Pit to Pit in order to rejuvenate himself. Nyssa is rumored to have discovered a way around that but we don’t know if she uses it herself as the side effects increase exponentially with her method and can literally turn the bather into an insane monster. Nyssa appears sane, she’s actually the most mentally stable of them all even if she is a sociopath, so I have my doubts.”

“So is that why Ra’s healed you? He wanted to drive you insane or turn you into a monster?” She asked worrying her lip again in a concerned gesture.

He smiled softly down at her and rubbed his thumb over her full bottom lip freeing it from her teeth, “I don’t think so.” He dipped his head and brushed her lips with his before raising his head and continuing his story. “The ‘prophesy’ Ra’s al Ghul believes in changes slightly every time he enters a Pit. Although he had Talia and Nyssa he still tried to produce a son until he had another vision that said that his ‘heir’ would actually be the child of one of his daughters and his greatest and most worthy adversary.”

“You,” she supplied.

Again he inclined his head slightly, “That’s what he believes anyway. Before that he encouraged both Nyssa and Talia to mate with whomever he chose so he could produce an heir.”

“He forced them—!” She started in disgust.

“No, not exactly; more like he actively attempted to indoctrinate or brainwash them,” he told her. “Ra’s may not have much use for women but he still believes he is a force of good and hand-chosen by the gods as their prophet to rid the world of corruption. In his delusions he also believes that his daughter, whichever one gives birth to his heir, will carry within her special gifts from the ‘pure gods’ that will be passed along to her child and that they will have the honor of becoming the mother of a new world. Nyssa balked; as you know her…interests run in other directions. As a result, she chose to interpret the prophesy differently. She believes it’s symbolic and that the daughter who proves herself to be most worthy of leading his army should be his heir; that the men who follow him are the children of the prophesy and, as their general, that she stands symbolically in the role of mother to his new world order. This led to an acrimonious feud between the two of them for several years until they reconciled. Nyssa calls herself the ‘Heir’ not because Ra’s named her as such, but because of her interpretation of his prophesy and the fact that she’s currently the last one standing.”

“Talia’s dead?”

“For a few years now,” he said grimly. “Talia was the opposite of her sister in just about every way. Not only did she buy into her father’s version of the prophesy wholesale, but she was determined to become the mother of a god and she was willing to eliminate the competition to do it. From time to time they were allies but, as I said, for a while they tried to actively destroy each other. Plus, and I don’t know if it’s true, but Talia once claimed to have given birth more than a dozen times; each child ‘rejected’ for being imperfect for reasons ranging from their sex to various birth defects.”

“What happened to them?” She asked and at his dark look and tense features she flinched. “Really? But she was their mother.”

“She was a killer,” he said flatly. “A sick, twisted monster.”

She felt sick to her stomach just thinking about it. “But you two…”
“I didn’t know what she was then,” he told her in a voice that reflected his own disgust at his unknowing actions.

“But what about Damian?” She asked quietly.

“In the end she killed him as well,” Bruce said, his voice growing cold as his deep blue eyes darkened to near black.

“What happened?” She said in a near whisper, her hand ghosting over his heart in sympathy.

He took a deep breath before continuing, “Ra’s basically disowned Talia for some reason and decided to show favor to Nyssa instead. Nyssa isn’t much better than her sister but, like I said, of all of them she’s the most rational and sane. It doesn’t make her any less of a killer; it just means that she was never blind to either of their faults. When Ra’s disowned Talia, Nyssa turned her back as well. She let it be known that Talia had betrayed them and that she and her assassins would support Ra’s and his goals without question, even if it meant destroying her sister who she felt had become corrupted by her ambition to become the mother of the new world. In retaliation, Talia redoubled her efforts to produce the true heir so she…” his jaw clenched, “drugged me and stole my DNA.”

Felicity felt as though she had been slammed face first into a brick wall. Basically, if what he was saying was true (and she had no reason to doubt it wasn’t), this woman had basically raped him. She didn’t say anything; there was nothing she could say. No mere words were enough so, instead, she laid her head on his chest and listened to the thrum of his heartbeat as he spoke.

“Although she was still fertile, she had no desire to carry any more children plus she thought of it as inefficient, so she used advanced medical technology and cloned a child using a combination of our DNA. Damian was an experiment; the first in an army of clones she planned to produce. Her goal was to produce warriors, fully grown and able to serve her from the moment they were ‘born’, but as he was her ‘prototype’ he was an infant and had to be raised. Unwilling to deal with the tedium of raising a child, she handed him off to be trained as an assassin from the moment he emerged from the artificial womb she had developed using a bio-engineered whale carcass.”

“A bio-engineered whale carcass?” She repeated in disbelief, unable to stop herself.

He drew a face in agreement, “I know, but remember; Talia and her father aren’t just assassins, they’re scientists but the ‘science’ they practice is entwined with mysticism. The whale carcass wasn’t just meant to be a vessel of bioengineering, it’s symbolic.”

“Of what?” She asked.

“Throughout history there have been myths linking whales to the gods; Jonah, Jason, Gilgamesh. Talia has a fascination with the Primordial beings within the Mesopotamian mythologies; monstrous beings that eventually gave birth to the gods. She was specifically fixated on the concept of primordial chaos giving birth to order since they were supposedly destroying and then recreating the world. Have you ever heard of Oannes?”

“No,” Felicity said. “I always stuck with reading mostly Greek, Roman, Norse, and Egyptian mythologies when I was a kid; basically anything that would get me a trip to the museum with Lucius. Apparently the Gotham Museum of Natural History is a bit limited in its scope. Now, if we should meet up with a guy who thinks he’s Zeus then I’ve got you covered.”

“Remind me to take you on a tour of Arkham sometime,” Bruce said ruefully. “As for Oannes, apparently in Sumerian-Babylonian mythology he’s a god who is both man and fish and he bestowed upon mankind the gift of wisdom. The use of the whale carcass was probably a nod to
As for Damian, By the time Talia had anything to do with him he was violent and undisciplined; he had never been shown a single bit of true affection and was both feared and revered as the chosen one by people who taught him that human life had no intrinsic value. Rather than kill him as she had her other imperfect offspring, she took him in hand and began to teach him about me. She called him Ibn al Xu’ffasch, which translates to ‘Son of the Bat’, and taught him to believe that, as my son, he would one day inherit the world. She then unleashed him on us knowing how much chaos he would cause in his wake while she perfected the cloning process.”

“You said she killed him and mentioned someone called ‘The Heretic’,” Felicity said quietly. “How…?”

His jaw clenched and he unconsciously drew her a bit closer, his arms squeezing her tight against his chest as he rubbed his stubbled cheek against the top of her head. To comfort her or himself she didn’t know, “We don’t know everything but Ra’s was unhappy with Talia for trying to corrupt his prophesy by producing ‘unnatural’ offspring. He saw Damian as an abomination.”

“Because he was a clone?” She asked quietly.

“Partly,” Bruce nodded. “Ra’s visions were pretty specific about the fact that the child would be born, not grown. Talia was trying to ‘cheat the gods’ which was the main reason why he rejected Damian as a potential heir, but it also had to do with the mythology she was working from. Remember I mentioned Oannes?” She nodded, “While many ancient Babylonians worshipped him as the bringer of wisdom, Ra’s chose to see him as ‘Musaras’ which translated to ‘repulsive abomination’ and he declared Talia to be ‘the mother of monsters’, not only because she sought to pervert his prophesy but because she had taken to destroying the Lazarus Pits in an effort to prevent her father from healing so that he would die and she and her ‘children’ could ascend without his interference. Ra’s was beginning to grow frail and had already used all of the Pits available to him that Talia hadn’t yet corrupted so one of his followers suggested he could use Damian as a vessel for his consciousness.”

“Wait, like switch bodies?” Felicity’s mouth fell open. “He can do that?”

Bruce inclined his head slightly, “Ra’s is powerful and that’s not the strangest thing I’ve ever seen from him or at all. As I said before, he’s more than just a master of assassins; he’s somewhat of a mystic as well. He realized that, as distasteful as he found the idea of Damian to be, by using his body as a vessel he could again use the Pits and therefore find immortality again. Talia, whether it was to punish Damian for slowly rejecting all of her teachings or to prevent Ra’s from getting the vessel he wanted, first placed a bounty on his head then sent a fully grown clone of Damian’s she called ‘The Heretic’ after him.” His eyes grew dark and haunted, “He cut Damian down in seconds. After the funeral I went after The Heretic with Dick and Tim. I was going to kill him,” he said without hesitation. “I nearly did. Dick could have stopped me but he didn’t even try; he had formed a bond of sorts with Damian and if it hadn’t been my hands on The Heretic, it would have been his. I had him on the ground and I was going to snap his neck when I looked at his face and realized that I was looking at Damian. This was Damian’s clone; as such, he was also my son. I couldn’t do it so I walked away and just… let him go.” He exhaled harshly, “Talia…Talia killed him later as well. She beheaded him for failing to defeat me.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

He kissed her hair in acknowledgement and rubbed his hand over her arm, “Damian was a monster, an amoral murdering sociopath, but he was changing,” he told her earnestly. “I was getting through to him, I know it. He…he redeemed himself at the end; he died a hero. I tried to save him but he was
dead before his little body hit the ground.” Felicity felt her tears flow freely both for Bruce and for the poor boy who never even had a chance at happiness. “I never thought of him as a child until he was there in my arms bleeding out.” He closed his eyes, “It was the first time I had ever had the chance to hold my own son.”

She wrapped her arms around him and stroked his hair as she buried her face in his neck. He pulled her close, one hand running up and down her bare back as the other embraced her around the waist, and kissed her shoulder. They held one another until the moment of grief had passed and Bruce began to speak again.

“I didn’t…” He shook his head, “I was a blind idiot four years ago, Felicity. I was arrogant and stubborn and I…” He looked down at her and brushed her hair behind her ear, “After you left I thought about coming after you a lot. Something held me back though, my own cowardice maybe, but then Damian showed back up shortly after you left town and I realized I couldn’t bring you back into my life as long as he was there.”

“You had to be there for your son,” she told him gently. “I would have understood.” She bit her lip again and laid her head on his chest, “Can I…ask you something about Damian?”

“Ask,” he told her.

“I only met him that one time but he seemed like an okay kid,” she said, listening to the steady beat of his heart under her ear. “He was a bit of a brat but he was smart and polite. Later when…” she paused.

“When Barbara and the others told you what a monster he was?” He supplied in a voice devoid of emotion.

“Yeah, sorry,” she said contritely.

“It’s nothing I haven’t said or thought myself,” he told her. “Go on.”

“It just didn’t gel with the kid I met. I didn’t think they were lying but it just didn’t make a lot of sense to me,” she said quietly. “I mean, I only was with him maybe an hour or two but he seemed fine.”

“That’s because,” Bruce hesitated a beat, “That’s because he was targeting you. He was planning on killing you, Baby—he was going to kill you but I stopped him.”

“What?” She said in surprise, her head coming off his chest so she could look at him incredulously. “Why? That makes no sense! What did I do?”

“Nothing,” he assured her. “He targeted you for the same reason he targeted Tim; he saw that I…cared deeply for you and you were just another rival to be eliminated.”

“But he never did anything,” she told him. “He just sat there and asked questions; he never came near me.”

“Yes, he did,” he told her.

“No, he didn’t,” she insisted. “I might not be clear on all of the details but I remember that much.”

“The cocoa.”

“What?” She asked in confusion.
“He offered you a cup of cocoa,” he told her grimly.

“I don’t…” she squinted her eyes as she thought back to that day as though literally looking into the past and remembered. “Oh. It was…?”

He nodded, not needing to say the words.

“You called me over and we talked about the upgrades or something then you sent me home,” she said quietly. “I thought you were mad at me at first because of the way you were trying to get rid of me.”

He pressed his lips to her forehead and smoothed his hand over her hair, “I walked in just a few seconds before you took that cup from him. Neither of you noticed at first and I could tell he was up to something; the minute he handed you the cup, I knew.” He tucked her head under his chin and wrapped his arms around her tightly, “I confronted him afterwards and he didn’t even bother to deny it. By then he was so used to killing on a whim that the idea that I would be angry never occurred to him. It was the only time I ever laid hands on him,” he told her. “I didn’t hit him but…I almost did.”

His lips tightened into a grim line, “He disappeared the next day and, I’ll admit, I was relieved. A large part of me hoped he would never return.” He turned his head to stare blankly at the wall, “I suppose that makes me the monster; wishing my own son would go away and never come back.”

“It makes you human,” she corrected him. “I wish I had known what you were going through. I would have come back; I could have helped—”

“No,” he said firmly, looking down at her. “If I had brought you back here and Damian returned he would have eventually killed you and then I would have had no choice but to have him committed or worse. He was so malicious and cruel in the beginning,” he said, his expression pained and brooding. “I failed Tim so much when Damian came into our lives. He was fine with Dick, but he despised Tim. I think it was because, until Damian arrived, Tim was the only one of my adopted ‘children’ to actually refer to himself as my son. I was still in my early twenties when I took Dick in and we always related to one another more like brothers than father and son, but by the time Tim came into my life... Well, anyway, Tim was always…special to me. I saw how Damian tortured him but I…Jesus, I was so damn numb and in shock from the whole thing I could barely keep it together. He nearly killed Tim on more than one occasion; had you been there you would have been targeted and—” His jaw tightened. “If anything had happened to you I don’t know what I would have done. I thought you were safe in Starling, safer than you’d be here anyway. That’s why when I found out you were working with the Arrow I—”

“Came to my rescue by behaving like a bull in a china shop with his head stuck up his ass?” She said with an impish grin. “I can take care of myself, you know.”

“You got shot,” he told her. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten my promise; I fully intend to break Queen’s teeth with my fist the next time I see him,” he told her grimly.

“It was almost two years ago,” she said with an exasperated sigh.

“And what other sorts of messes besides jumping off buildings and getting shot in the shoulder has he gotten you into since then, hmm?” He asked her with a narrowed eye.

“Do you really want to know?” Felicity asked him.

“Yes,” Bruce bit out sharply.

“I assume you want everything from the beginning, so; there’s the bomb collar around my neck—”
“Someone put a bomb around your neck?” Bruce asked in a near shout, his face suffused with angry color.

“Yeah, but that happened way before I got shot,” she told him airily. “Heck, I hadn’t even crashed through my first window at that point, I don’t think. It’s hard putting it all in chronological sequence, y’know?” She squinted towards the ceiling, “Bomb collar, mob casino, jumping off a building, crossbow to the neck, elevator shaft…wait, was it elevator shaft and then crossbow?” She squinted up at the ceiling then shrugged, “Serial killer, crazed drug lord, nearly crushed to death in a basement, jumping out of a plane onto a landmine, facing down the Bratva, nearly blown up by exploding computers, then getting shot. A couple more bombs, some, I’ll admit, I set myself,” she said sheepishly. “More killers, more bullets, Brother Blood and his community organizing/wholesale campaign of destruction,” she paused and threw him a rueful look. “Yeah, Starling gets its fair share of the crazies, too. The sniper again, the Dark Archer again, crossbow to the neck again, yet more bombs; that year was chock full of repeats. The return of the Clock King who was pretty pissed at me, let me tell you, the weird ninja bakeneko chick with the poisoned fingernails and the knives, lots of escapades with meta-humans, the guy with the mind control drug-thing which was, let me tell you, a whole barrel of laughs, the creepy guy with the puppets who got a little too handsy; yeah, now he pissed me off,” she said with a scowl. “He tried to treat me like one of his puppets by sticking his hand where it didn’t belong, if you know what I mean. I hauled off and smacked the shit out of him and, by the time I was done, he practically begged Oliver and Lance to take him to jail. I was actually kind of proud of that one and afterwards Lance took me out for Thai food to celebrate the effectiveness of my right hook. A bunch of other crazy stuff I really don’t want to get into right now, some guy calling himself the Sewer King who kept alligators as pets and a river of poo—Eh, everything after that is pretty much a blur, really.”

His face was a mask of shock and anger as he listened without interrupting until she was done, “I can’t believe you can be so casual about nearly losing your life like this,” he glowered. “At some point didn’t you think, ‘maybe I should go home’? Or ‘maybe I should call Bruce, Dick, or Tim’ when things began to get out of hand down there? ‘Maybe this whole situation is more than I should be handling alone’!”

“I wasn’t alone; I had my team. Besides,” she grimaced, “if I had called any of you guys, you would have been down there in a heartbeat and—”

“You’re goddamn right I would have!” He growled holding her a little tighter against his chest as though somehow protecting her from the past. “I would have been down there in a fucking minute and I definitely wouldn’t have been happy with your friend Queen when I got there!”

“I know and I appreciate that,” she said easily, patting his chest with a gentle hand, “However, after you’ve been doing this stuff for a while there isn’t a whole lot left to be scared of, really,” she shrugged. “It kind of raises the bar on fear. I even started killing my own spiders after that, although the river of poo thing…” She made a face, “Yeah, I’m never going into another sewer again. The next time a baddie wants to turn himself into the underground king of the post-flush, I’m going on vacation. At the very least I’m investing in a good pair of hip waders and a rebreather. I had to buy a special shampoo and throw away a nice pair of shoes and my favorite loofa after that one.”

“The fact that you came so close to losing your life and seeing how you’re so casually dismissing it terrifies me, you know that? On second thought, I don’t want to hear this,” Bruce muttered. “Not until later after I’ve had coffee and calmed down somewhat.”

She stroked his cheek softly until he focused on her again, “You really planned on coming after me?” She asked, with a hint of vulnerability.
He leaned his head back against the headboard and let out a harsh breath, “Not for a few days. It took me a while to get my head out of my ass,” his lips quirked upwards slightly and she smiled back to acknowledge her frequently used chastisement. “After a few days of stewing over the whole thing, I decided to ask your father…” he exhaled roughly.

“What?” She prodded.

“I was…going to ask him for permission to ask you to marry me,” he admitted reluctantly.

“Seriously?” She squeaked. “Wait, you were going to ask my dad before you even talked to me? Who are you; Mr. Darcy?”

He squirmed uncomfortably and his lips firmed into a hard line, “It was…stupid. I was so confused about my feelings, plus Damian had thrown me off my game; I convinced myself that marrying you made sense and I wanted your dad’s approval, plus…”

“Plus?” She prompted.

He sighed, “You weren’t answering my messages or picking up on my calls so I figured that once I talked to him then maybe that would go a long way towards getting you to forgive me.” He shrugged ruefully, “My only defense is that I was confused and completely out of my element with the whole situation. You weren’t some random one night stand or a sophisticated seductress; you were the little girl I watched grow up and you were a virgin when we…when *I* seduced you in the Batcave.” He grimaced, “On one hand, I was feeling incredibly guilty, not just for treating you the way I had, but for seducing you to begin with. On the other hand I still wanted you so I tried to justify my feelings, my confusion, my wanting to keep you by my side, by turning you into another protocol. You were smart, beautiful, we were sexually compatible, you could be an asset both in the boardroom and in the Batcave,” he shook his head. “At the time, and in the state I was in, it made sense. Had I not been in denial, I would have realized right away that, not only was I being incredibly selfish and an even bigger ass than usual, but that you would have turned me down flat. You would have been right to do it too had I approached you with my plan but you were already gone and Damian returned a few days later. After that I knew I needed to concentrate on him and let you go.”

“I wouldn’t have said no,” she said quietly as she looked down at the covers.

He stiffened in surprise and placed his fingers on her chin to turn her face toward his, “Why? I was too old for you, broken; I would have wound up using you like just another asset or protocol. You wouldn’t have been happy with the man I was then and I wouldn’t have ever noticed because I was too caught up in my own selfishness.”

“I was in love with you, Bruce,” she said sadly, a hint of unshed tears in her voice. “Had you offered me the chance to be with you forever, even if my marrying you was just another way of securing the mission, I would have said yes. I was…it took me a long time to come into my own and at nineteen I had no idea who I was yet or what I was capable of doing.”

“And now?” He asked her.

“Are you asking me to be Batman’s beard?” She joked lightly.

“I’m asking if, in spite of all the mistakes I’ve made, you still love me?” He asked, his eyes completely focused on her.

The temptation to deflect and run was strong but she chose to ignore it and tell the truth, “Bruce, even though at times I wished I wasn’t, I’ve never not been in love with you,” she told him honestly.
She cupped his cheek and let her fingertips rasp against his stubble. “I’m in love with you now, or can’t you tell?”

“And Queen?” He asked, his expression guarded even as his hand came up to caress the one that held his cheek.

She bit her lip and thought about what she should say before answering, “I won’t lie to you; I love him, too. I’ve been in love with him for…” she shrugged, “A while now. I don’t know when it became real love but he never acted on it until after you and I happened again. I don’t know if it’s because he genuinely cares about me or because he was feeling territorial but I also know that I can’t be with him and he can’t be with me.” She looked him in the eye bravely, “Even if I left here and returned to Starling City there just isn’t a future for me and Oliver; not now and probably not ever. I know…I know that’s probably not what you wanted to hear but I didn’t sleep with Oliver because I was feeling vulnerable, although that was probably a contributing factor. I allowed it to happen because I loved him; I will probably always love him just like I’ve always loved you and, right or wrong, I don’t regret our night together,” she looked at him apologetically, “I’m sorry but I don’t.”

“How do you feel about me? What does that mean for us?” Bruce asked in a rare display of vulnerability.

“I don’t know. I mean, I know how I feel; I told you, but what it means…?” She shook her head slightly, allowing the pain to wash over her for a moment, “I spoke to Oliver the other day and a lot was said that was long overdue and necessary for both of us to find closure...or as close to closure as we’ll probably ever get,” she grimaced. “We talked about us, about you and me, I mean; and Oliver basically told me that I should move on from my life there, even if it meant being with you. He told me he would try to do the same and asked if I would stay away and allow him the opportunity to heal as well. It was all very civilized and actually very… ‘precious’ is the only word I can think of to describe it.” She closed her eyes, “As much as it hurt to hear and as painful as it was, I just realized, just this very moment, that maybe it was a gift. He acknowledged his feelings for me and mine for him; that’s…enough I guess. It’s more than what I had before, at least.” She took a deep breath, licked her lips that had suddenly gone dry, and opened her eyes to look at him again, “He asked me if I wanted to be with you and I told him the truth, I didn’t lie; I told him I didn’t know but that there was something between us and that…” she paused. “It was right after we made love that day in your office and I told him that you talked to me about being together. He said that since he couldn’t be with me then I should try to be with you if that’s what I really wanted.”

“Is that what you want?” Bruce asked quietly, “Do you want to be with me or do you want to go back to him?”

She sighed, “The truth is that Oliver is just beginning his mission and he can’t be distracted by a relationship right now and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life waiting for him to notice me again.” She stroked the corners of his eyes where the lines she once loved used to be and she imagined what it would be like to do this again when they reemerged in a few years’ time. “I love Oliver and I always will, but I’m not what he needs right now and he’s not ready to be what I need either.” The minute she said it she realized it was the truth. She loved Oliver but, at the moment, she couldn’t imagine a future with him. If she were honest, she probably never had.

She’d been his friend and companion long enough to be used to the way he could so easily overlook her when it suited him or when he became distracted by some new love interest. When Sara first joined the team, even though their romance had quickly fizzled out, he stopped seeing her altogether. Despite his assurances that she had always come first, Oliver became so distant and distracted he barely acknowledged her. Diggle had to take over her protection detail because he was busy with other things and, while she thought she understood that, now she had to wonder if she hadn’t been
unconsciously harboring some resentment over it this entire time.

If Bruce had been the one facing Deathstroke she never would have been left in a position where she had to face him on her own and certainly not twice. Not that it had been Oliver’s fault; it’s not that she resented him, she didn’t. It had been her idea after all, but the fact that he kept disregarding her advice and help until that became their only option did serve as a reminder of how he thought of her and of her place in his life. Even when she managed to take out Deathstroke and survive, he just gave her a pat on the head and a quick thanks then completely ignored her until Sara broke it off a few weeks later. Then, not even a week after that, he began seeing Laurel again and she was pushed even further out of his life.

That had been rough. It was bad enough when he hooked up with Sara but that she could understand, plus Sara was a member of the team. Laurel though… Even though she knew his secret and was sharing in the mission, it just seemed wrong; especially since they started up right on the coattails of her sister leaving. Felicity had been disgusted with him for that on Sara’s behalf and made no secret of it, but he barely acknowledged her or her many pointed jabs. Even when he and Laurel had their final confrontation that she’d been a reluctant witness to, he never apologized for pulling an emotional disappearing act.

Following the second confrontation with Slade six months ago, Laurel came back into town after visiting her mother to find everyone critically injured and that no one had even thought to call her until her father phoned from the hospital after coming out of surgery. After that, the discomfort and tension that had always existed between the two of them grew to be palatable. Felicity was given the impression that Laurel resented the hell out of the fact that she had been the last to know and that she blamed her personally for being left out of the loop even though it had been Oliver’s call. In fact, truth be told, she had been left out of the loop as well; if it weren’t for Thea’s knack for snooping she wouldn’t have known something was up until it was too late herself. Still, Laurel didn’t see it that way and the fact that Thea had taken to telling her off over it in the Lair, leaving Oliver to constantly act as referee between his sister and his lover, hadn’t helped matters either. The two women had nearly come to blows when Thea basically told Laurel to stop being a, quote, ‘whiny ass bratty bitch’ because she was mad that she hadn’t had the opportunity to get blown up like the rest of them and that she needed to get over herself; a statement that Laurel did not appreciate in the least.

Felicity, doing what she had always done, sank into the shadows and watched in dismay as everything she’d built seemed to fall apart around her. Her home had been invaded by darkness and there was nothing she could do to fix it. Perhaps it was her strategic retreat inside of herself that was one of the reasons why Laurel had grown to resent her presence even more than Thea’s or Sara’s. It was a lot of things actually; Oliver’s reliance on her skills compared to his reliance on Laurel’s, his utter passiveness when it came to resolving the tensions between her and his sister, Felicity’s bond with Sara and Thea growing stronger as her relationship with them seemed to be quickly breaking down, even the way Lance seemed to take her side the one time Laurel had made the mistake of snapping at her in front of him. Laurel felt left out and no one understood that feeling more than Felicity, but there wasn’t anything she could do about it but sink further into the shadows that surrounded them, make herself as small a target as possible, and wait for the storm to pass.

Tensions were running high and the entire team was in chaos. Sara, unable to deal with it, left town to stay with her mother during her recuperation. She used it as an opportunity to break things off with Oliver and escape the love triangle that was quickly developing between the three of them; a move Felicity couldn’t blame her for. In fact, she’d been tempted to ask her if she could tag along. Thea was acting out more and more, Laurel was angry because she felt undervalued even though the two of them had rekindled their relationship. Instead of addressing that with Oliver, Felicity became the convenient scapegoat for all her resentment. As all of this was happening, she returned to her addictive behavior and had been hiding her fall off the wagon fairly effectively until one night, drunk
and high on pills, she followed Oliver to Verdant. She was spiraling; while deep into a hypomanic state and intoxicated, she convinced herself that he was sneaking off to meet another girl. She walked in and saw him talking with her, his hand resting on her shoulder before leaning in to hug her, just before they headed down into the basement. Laurel, seeing what had been a completely innocent gesture on Oliver’s part, misinterpreted it and reacted badly. She attacked her verbally and with malicious precision. Felicity, although taken completely taken off guard by the viciousness of the confrontation, wisely said nothing.

Since learning Oliver was the Arrow, Laurel had been, if not friendly, at least cordial and respectful towards her even though she had always sensed an edge of barely concealed distrust on the other woman’s part. Plus, unlike Sara, from the moment Laurel joined Team Arrow, she seemed to go out of her way to make Felicity feel like an outsider by not-so-subtly comparing her role as the interim Canary and later as Manhunter with Felicity’s tech skills and finding her contribution to the cause somewhat lacking. Sara had attempted to mitigate that by telling her Laurel had always been competitive, especially with other women, and not to take it personally. Still, despite Sara’s reassurances and Thea taking up the cause as her unsolicited champion, it had been difficult not to feel the sting of the other woman’s pointed barbs from time to time. Even if Oliver was being utterly oblivious to them, at least Dig saw early on what was happening and, as a result, would often take the time to pull her aside to let her know that just because she fought her battles in pencil skirts and glasses instead of with her fists, it didn’t make her less a part of the team.

She supposed that the other thing that had been a major contributor to the other woman’s insecurities came from the fact that she had been with the mission since the beginning and that, even though Laurel had known him longer, she was suddenly relegated to the role of newcomer. There was an intimacy between her and Oliver as a result, and it had been hard for Laurel to understand Felicity’s place in his life. Sara she could handle, but Felicity’s role within the team dynamic had always eluded her. Laurel confronted them in a rage; she even went so far as to accuse her of betraying her friendship with Sara even though she was the one sleeping with Oliver. The things she said…

After she snapped out of her fugue, (even though the rational part of her brain recognized the fact that Laurel wasn’t thinking clearly and probably would have never talked to her like that had she been sober) she had so wanted to let fly with her own volley of cutting remarks. For weeks she’d had to put up with this stupid melodrama in the Lair and she was just as sick of it as Thea was, but she wasn’t Thea and she didn’t have the luxury of being able to lend a voice to her anger. She was just Oliver’s EA and partner, and Laurel was the woman he loved; if she wanted to maintain a place in his life then she would have to keep silent until the woman had said her fill or risk having him be forced to choose sides. If that happened, she knew she’d lose every time. That simple realization wasn’t due to poor self-esteem; it was merely a fact. Time and time again Oliver had proven that no matter how far she went, the guilt he felt would never allow him to choose her or anyone else over Laurel.

It took everything she had to keep her mouth shut and the whole time Laurel was shouting at her she just stood there and stared at Oliver, waiting for him to step in. She didn’t care if he didn’t stand up for her, just as long as he stopped it so she could leave. The woman had her cornered, literally cornered, and she had nowhere to physically go except through her so she had to just stand there and take it. He never said a word though, just looked on sadly until Laurel stepped forward, hand raised as though preparing to strike her. That’s when he snapped out of his guilt-fueled trance; but whether it was to protect her or to protect Laurel, she didn’t know. He grabbed Laurel’s arm and asked her to excuse them for a minute, so she did. That was it.

She never heard what they said but he stopped seeing Laurel after that and the other woman finally went to rehab and therapy after she figured out that AA wasn’t enough. Laurel had Lance deliver a letter of apology to her afterwards as a part of her twelve steps and he let her know that she’d been
diagnosed with a milder form of bipolar called cyclothymic disorder. Apparently she’d been struggling with it for a while and the addictive behavior was her way of self-medicating. He said that the new meds helped a lot, along with the psychotherapy and going to AA meetings. As sympathetic as she tried to be given that Laurel was Lance’s daughter, after he left she tossed the unopened letter in her desk without reading it. Maybe it was petty, but she just wasn’t in a very forgiving mood after everything she’d been through. Later, when she looked for it, it was gone. She figured that someone, probably Roy, had disposed of it for her. Normally she would have been pissed at the highhandedness of something like that but instead she’d just been grateful not to have to deal with whatever Laurel had written; it probably would have just led to her tossing one more angst-filled log on the fire anyway.

Dig had tried to talk to her about it; the other man was extremely upset by the whole situation. Roy had overheard the whole thing over the security feed when Laurel verbally attacked her and had relayed it to him verbatim, especially the really mean personal stuff, along with the fact that Oliver had just stood there and let it happen. Ever since the thing with Slade, the younger man had become particularly protective toward her and offered to beat some sense into Oliver but she’d waved him off. Outwardly she’d kept a stiff upper lip about the whole thing, pretended it didn’t matter, but when she got home she burst into tears and didn’t stop until the three pints of ice cream in her freezer were gone. After another nearly sleepless night, one of many spent tossing and turning between the nightmares that would always leave her in a cold sweat, she’d no choice but to call in sick as a result of the migraine brought on from a combination of her binging on three cartons of Ben and Jerry’s, two entire boxes of Entenmann’s Marshmallow Iced Devil’s Food Cake, and the entire bottle of Clos de los Siete she’d chased them down with.

The weird thing was that it wasn’t what Laurel had said to her, not really, or the fact that Oliver didn’t do anything to stop it that upset her. Laurel was sick, she knew that and, even though it didn’t excuse her behavior, she didn’t really take it personally; not even when she taunted her over the whole Daniel thing, (although that had been a pretty low blow) and Oliver, well, that stung but he’d always been useless when it came to confronting the women in his life so she wasn’t surprised by his reaction at all. What had upset her was the feeling that she was alone and then hearing Laurel confirm it.

For one brief moment it seemed like life was good again and that everything was going to be fine. She allowed herself to forget about the tension they’d been under as Oliver leaned in to apologize and to thank her for saving his sister, and the next she was being reminded at the top of Laurel’s lungs that she didn’t fit in and that she was utterly forgettable. In fact, the only thing she’d said that really hurt were the words, ‘you will always be alone’.

She almost allowed herself to cry at that point and it took everything she had not to. It hurt because those were the words she often tortured herself with. It was like Laurel knew that for most of her life she’d felt like a ghost. It was like she was wearing a perception filter or something; like she was the TARDIS and, even though she was this big blue box in the middle of everything, people’s eyes would just skitter over her. They’d know she was there; they just couldn’t seem to remember to care about it. It had always been that way, ever since she was little.

She could be standing right in front of people and it was as though she were invisible. The only people who ever seemed to really see her were her immediate family and Bruce. In fact, Bruce was probably the first person outside of her family who ever really noticed her; that was what made her fall in love with him to begin with. Even at work people looked through her. After working at QC for years, she still had to remind Gloria in HR what her name was every time they ran into each other and that woman knew everybody. Not that her reaction was that unusual; no one ever seemed to remember her name even though ‘Felicity’ wasn’t exactly common. At least at work she could wear a name badge so that helped cut down on the reintroductions somewhat.
She still knew though. Whenever they’d give her that weirded out smile and their eyes would drop to her chest, she knew they were desperately trying to find her ID badge because, let’s face it, her boobs weren’t big enough to command that much attention. The real fun came when she’d either leave it off or it would accidently flip around, obscuring her name. That was always good for a laugh. There were the Friendly Fakers who covered it up with pet names like ‘hon’, ‘sweetie’, and ‘cookie’, the Formal Fakers with ‘ma’am’, and ‘miss’, and the Fumbling Fakers who just randomly guessed at it. Most got close with a ‘Felicia’, ‘Phoebe’, or a ‘Fiona’, but her favorite had been the one guy who sprang ‘Fifi’ on her; Elijah Dennison, a junior executive with Marketing. He tried that one out during a meeting and it made Oliver actually do a spit-take then glare in his direction until he practically ran out of the room with his tail between his legs.

Oliver was one of the few people who she ever felt really saw her other than Bruce; that’s why whenever he seemed to push her aside it always hurt more than it did with anyone else. Sad to say, but Oliver was actually one of the first people to even talk to her when she came to work there. She’d been in the IT department for a couple of months and the only people who even spoke to her up till then were Walter, Gloria, and her immediate supervisor, Dennis Dearborn; the one who kept calling her ‘Felicia’ and asking if she was new. She even got stuck using a cubicle space in the server room because he kept assigning her office to other people thinking that it was empty. God, he was an idiot. It was one of the main reasons she liked computers actually; no human contact to deal with. People might never see her, but they did at least check their e-mail occasionally.

Oliver never forgot her name; he never tried giving her a nickname or fumbled around her. He did, however, have a nasty habit of shuffling her aside. While she knew that he cared about her, his allowing Laurel to speak to her in that manner meant that he just didn’t care *enough*. That was what hurt the most.

She stood there and watched as Oliver stood frozen, pain and guilt etched on his face as filth spewed from Laurel’s mouth and realized that she was right. She was both easily forgettable and alone; what’s more is that she always had been. At that moment she felt all of it; all the insecurities that had haunted her since childhood, all the insecurities that had haunted her since childhood, all the cruel asides about her and her mother she had heard spoken so casually as though they didn’t care that she was standing right there in front of them as they said it; like they didn’t know or didn’t care that she was even in the room. It hurt; it felt like a betrayal when Oliver didn’t immediately step in, so she allowed herself a single night of depression before getting back up on the horse and moving on with her life and the mission because that was what she had always done. She put on her happy face and kept going.

That was a few months ago and she thought she was over it, but maybe she wasn’t. Maybe she was thinking about it now because it just served as a clear reminder of the different ways both men had treated her in the past. She loved Oliver, and she was pretty sure he loved her, but he was, in a word, damaged. His women were his biggest weakness and she didn’t want to become yet another brick in the wall of guilt he’d built around himself. Not only that, but Oliver tended to be capricious in matters of the heart. He just didn’t have the emotional stability necessary to maintain a healthy relationship with anyone. Even if he had been inclined to try, with everything else he had going on in his life, she just would never be seen as a priority; she would never come first. Bruce was an ass at times, yes, but she never questioned the fact that she had always come first with him and always would.

There was more to it, of course, and maybe it was unfair of her to compare the two men but Bruce, even before they had been involved, would have always protected and supported her. She had no doubts that Oliver would take a bullet for her in a heartbeat but would he ever put her emotional needs first? No. Someone or something else would always come before her; his mission, his sister, his exes, himself. She wasn’t angry or resentful towards him for it either, that was the sad part. After all, it was her fault for not demanding his respect, right? He treated her like a piece of equipment for
years before they finally came together because she allowed him to and that made it her fault, not his.

Still…

Without summoning it, her conversation with Sara the day before came to mind:

“Is it possible to love two people at the same time?”

“Yes, but you always wind up loving one of them just a little more or you find yourself drawn to the one who needs you just a little more than the other. Sometimes it’s a matter of choosing the person who chooses you, you know? Sometimes it simply comes down to self-preservation.”

She took a centering breath before speaking. “If Oliver ever needs me, I’ll go; I won’t abandon his mission, but I won’t go back to what we had.” She shook her head, “Oliver isn’t in love with me; he loves me but not enough to make it work, and I deserve more. I guess all I needed to do was put some space between us in order to remember that.”

“So where does that leave us,” he asked, his expression guarded and tense.

She tilted her head and looked at him with a sad half-smile, “I don’t know. I do know that I’ve loved you my entire life. I was in love with you the first time we slept together and every time since even when I probably should have hated you.” He blanched and she soothed the sting of her words by running her fingertips over the delicate skin at the corners of his eyes and smiling up at him gently, “Even when I knew we were making a mistake, I loved you. I’ve never said the words ‘I love you’ to any other man, not even Oliver, and I probably never will. That said, I don’t expect you to feel the same way about me; that’s not why I’m telling you this. I know you care about me and, for now that’s enough, but love; I accepted the fact that love just isn’t something you can give me a very long time ago.” She swallowed the lump in her throat and looked away from him, “It took me a while but I think I’ve finally figured it out. I love you but I know myself enough to know that I deserve better than half a relationship. I won’t ask you for more than what you’re willing to give, but I won’t accept less than what I deserve anymore either.”

“Meaning what?” He asked, his eyes searching hers.

“Meaning that I will be your lover but not your mistress,” she told him lightly. “I’ll sleep with you but I won’t live with you. I’ll love you but I won’t lose myself to you. I’ll work with you but not for you. And when the time comes, if I do decide I want more or if I think I’m getting in the way of your happiness, I’ll leave before you have to ask me to. Conversely, I won’t stay where I’m not welcome or wanted, I won’t be objectified or put on a shelf, I won’t chase after you, I won’t try to cage you, but I won’t be caged either,” she rubbed her fingertips along his jawline, her fingertips playing with the cleft in his chin as she rested her head against the warm skin of his throat. “I love you enough to let you go and not try to keep you, Bruce. I already know this, us, comes with an expiration date. You don’t need to give me any speeches or worry about hurting me; I’m going in with eyes wide open this time. For now, this is enough for me but, if it’s too much for you, then we can just leave it in this room and walk away with no hard feelings as long as we’re clear that this is it. We enjoy today and then you let me go. I’m not asking for a relationship or a commitment but I can’t keep doing this back and forth with you. I just won’t. If this is where we end then I’m done and you need to respect that and stay away. It may not be perfect but I can deal with keeping it casual, temporary, and just between us; I can be okay with not being public or official. If you’re not okay with even that, then we need to end it once and for all. Either way it goes, I deserve to be happy and so do you.”

“My Happiness,” he whispered.

“Your happiness will always be a priority to me,” she told him quietly. “Just like you’ve always
made my safety a priority; I care about you.”

“No,” he shook his head, “Not my happiness, ‘My Happiness’,“ he emphasized. “The painting your mother did of you when you were little; remember it?”

“Of course,” she said taken slightly off-guard by the change in subject. “What about it?”

“I bought it; a couple of years ago at a fundraiser,” he told her. “At the time I said it was so that I could keep it at the Foundation in memory of your mother and for Lucius but, the truth was, I bought it because,” he paused. “You’re my happiness, Felicity; you’re it. Ever since you were a little girl you could always make me smile and, as you got older, I kept an eye on you but that summer—” He shook his head ruefully, “I took one look at you and realized that I was in trouble. I was a grown man and you were this little girl I watched grow up and I was suddenly thinking things that made me feel like a goddamned pervert. I just…I couldn’t control myself around you and it was driving me insane. I’d been fascinated by other women, I’d even loved a few, but I had never fallen in love with anyone before. Between my confusion over that, and the insecurities I had concerning our age gap, I didn’t know what to do, I felt completely helpless and lost. It was like I was under some kind of spell or something, like I was just drawn to you against my will and I didn’t know how to deal with it. I tried avoiding you, pushing you away…” He scowled, “After we made love I thought what I had been feeling would just go away, but it didn’t. It never has, and every time we’ve been together since it’s just gotten stronger,” he said quietly.

They sat in silence until a scowl appeared on his face. “Well?” He prompted, looking more than a little put out.

“Well, what?” Felicity asked him.

He glowered at her, “I just told you I’m in love with you.”

She blinked at him in surprise, “You did?”

“You’re…” He made an impatient noise in his throat, “You drive me absolutely insane, you know that? Damn it, what do you think I’ve been—? Fine! If you still don’t get what I’ve been trying to tell you this entire time then let me just spell it out for you once and for all!” He hauled her toward him, kissing her hard. When they broke apart he grasped her chin in his hand and eyed her angrily, “I love you! I’m in love with you! I don’t want you to be my mistress, or my lover, or just shack up or share space, I don’t want to sneak around in dark corners and not acknowledge how I feel about you publicly, and I don’t want you to leave; I love you, understand? I. Love. You.” He said firmly.

“Okay, so we won’t do any of that stuff,” she said dizzily.

“Damn it, woman! I’m telling you that you are my happiness! You! You’re it! I love you and I—I--” he pressed his forehead against hers and shut his eyes tight. “I don’t want this to be casual or temporary, I don’t want this to be ‘undefined’, and I don’t want to walk into this with an out clause or an expiration date attached. I may not be able to give you everything you deserve but I want the chance to try. I want to be allowed the right to make that happen and I don’t want the feelings I have for you to be publicly relegated to labels as ridiculously inadequate as ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’!”

“Okay, I could be down with that. So what do you want, Bruce?”

“I want more,” he said quietly. “I want something better than that.”

“They’re just words, Bruce…” she began.

“No, they’re not,” he told her. “They imply that what I feel for you can go away; that what we have
is some kind of childish little game we’re playing and this is never going away. I need to be able to call us something more permanent than that.”

She bit her bottom lip. The expression on his face wasn’t one she’d ever seen before and it was making her very nervous, “Okay,” she said, deciding to play it off with a nervous chuckle, “but unless we can come up with a new word what you’re implying kind of sounds a little close to, well, the whole Chrysanthemum and Churchill and dinner by seven every night kind of deal.”

He paused as though considering it, “Well, I think we should reconsider the names, at least, and I might not always make it to dinner by seven but…” he let his voice trail off expectantly.

Seconds ticked slowly by as she stared at him, her ears ringing slightly as she tried to sort through what seemed to be hinting at. “Um, I’m sorry, I’m still a little fuzzy here; did you just ask me to marry you? Because…”

“I didn’t ask,” Bruce told her, his expression still and serious. “Asking implies that I’m giving you a choice in the matter and there isn’t one. I want this; I want you and you want me. I don’t want there to be any ambiguities or equivocations between us and the best way I know of to do that is to give you my name. You, this finger,” he lifted her left hand and kissed her empty ring finger softly then gave her a pointed look, “has always belonged to me. I should have put my ring on that finger four years ago and the first chance I get I’m correcting that mistake. We’ve wasted too many years as it is; I’m not wasting any more.” He offered her a triumphant look, “So, any other questions?”

“What other names did you have in mind?” She said dumbly, her brain having gone completely offline at that point.

His lips quirked upwards in a slight smile, “Well, I’m kind of torn on the issue of children to begin with and I don’t necessarily think we should have kids right away if we do have them but, if and when we decide to, I’d prefer we use family names,” he said in an almost casual tone as though he’d already put a great deal of thought into it. “I’ve never been fond of trendy names that are purposefully misspelled or sound like you’re being read law office letterhead. I prefer strong, simple names with a lot of history behind them: Thomas for my dad or Patrick for my grandfather then there’s my mother’s name, Martha, or my grandmother, Betsy. Your dad already has a namesake in Luke but we could add Evie and Peggy Ann to the list as well.”

“Betsy?” She asked dizzily. “And how many kids are we talking about? That’s,” she shook her head, “Six names.”

Her discombobulated senses flashed on the image of a dark haired little girl with deep blue eyes holding her hand while she stood in the middle of a park wearing mom jeans:

“Hi, I’m Felicity; Betsy’s mom. And Patrick’s mom, and Thomas’s mom, and Martha’s mom, oh and that’s Evie over there, and Peggy Ann…”

Weird and more than a little terrifying.

“As many as you want I guess; we could have one or ten or a dozen, I don’t care, but if you want to use up all the names on the list Betsy is short for Elizabeth Helena so that would bring us up to seven,” he grinned. “On second thought, keeping you barefoot and pregnant might not be such a bad idea after all. Not only would it be both fun and challenging but you’d be so busy running after kids that it might actually keep you out of trouble.”

Helena.
Same scene with a twist. This time she was in the same park only holding the hand of a leather clad Huntress:

“Okay Helena, be good for mommy and don’t skewer any of the other kids with a crossbow bolt or you won’t get a cookie afterwards.”

“If those are the only options out there then I’d rather have a ‘Betsy’ than a ‘Helena’,” she said faintly.

“Like I said, I don’t really care,” he told her. “Name them whatever you want; now does that mean you’ll marry me, or what?”

“Marriage, right,” She said snapping back to reality. “Bruce, we’ve spent the last several weeks having sex then yelling at each other afterwards. Don’t you think we should, I don’t know, date first?” She asked.

“I apologized for that and we’re already sleeping together; what would be the point of dating? It would just be a waste of time as far as I’m concerned,” he said grumpily.

“Really?” She said looking at him askance.

“Yes, really,” he said dryly. “Dating implies courtship and, frankly, we don’t need to go through all of that rigmarole so we might as well just get this show on the road, don’t you think? We already know all we need to know about each other so I say we quit wasting time and just get it over with.”

_Rigmarole._

Huh, that’s…different.

She gave him an incredulous look, “Get it over with?”

“Exactly; why can’t you just marry me without us having to go through the rest of that crap?” he said flatly. “We should just get this over with and move on.”

“I don’t know,” she said slowly, “maybe because that’s just how most normal people do things?”

“We’re not most people and I don’t have time to waste on that kind of thing.”

She looked at him closely and, yep, he was serious.

“You know, that’s not exactly the kind of proposal I was expecting,” Felicity told him

He raised a superior eyebrow at her, “Again, I wasn’t proposing. Proposing implies--”

She gave him a quelling glare, “Yeah, I heard you the first time; ‘not a negotiation’. Still, even if I did agree to do it your way, which for the record I’m not going to; my dad would probably be a little put out when I show up to dinner married to you without any kind of explanation, so a little bit of lead time would be nice.”

“Shit,” he swore rubbing his hand over his mouth. “I’ll have to talk to Lucius about us. That’s not going to be pleasant,” he grumbled.

“No, it’s not; just ask Tim. He’s an old fashioned guy, particularly when it comes to me and Tam,” she said with very little sympathy. “I know you’re into expediency and dislike mincing words, especially when it comes to ‘getting this show on the road’, but I suggest you don’t lead with, ‘but Lucius, we’re already sleeping together…’ and ending with ‘who has time for all that rigmarole and
He grimaced, “Fine,” he said at last, “We’ll…‘date’.”

“Thank you,” she said dryly.

He frowned and reached for a tablet that was sitting in its docking station on the nightstand then turned it on and cued up his schedule. “How long do you think it will take before your dad gets used to the idea and we can get married because I’d like to go ahead and clear some time for the wedding,” he asked her as he scrolled through it. “I figure, what, a couple of weeks? Three tops? I figure we could go for late March; sometime around the first day of spring so we can have a token engagement as well. That would give us…” he checked the calendar, “around six weeks or so to get everything done. That’ll work out perfectly; Dick’s birthday is the 21st so he’ll be in town and we can do it that Saturday. I have to be in the UK on business the following week so we can have a quick honeymoon in Scotland afterwards at Waynemoor Castle; I can call Harold and have him open a wing and make sure everything’s ready for us. We’ll call the first three weeks ‘dating’ and the last three our ‘engagement’…unless, of course, you’re planning on doing some overdone society thing?” He eyed her dubiously, “You aren’t are you? Because I was hoping we could just do something simple at the manor, maybe a justice of the peace and some cake, but if you want to do something else it’s up to you as long as we can get it done before the end of March. Moving this meeting would be a real pain in the ass and I need to be there.” He said, putting the tablet back on his nightstand.

“Um…” She squinted at him and tried curb the impulse to either laugh out loud or smack him upside the head, “Simple…simple is good—if we were going to get married, but I don’t know about that timeline. I’m not really sure, I’ve never really been in this situation before, but I think it might take a little longer than that to get through the whole dating-engagement-wedding thing.”

“What; a month? Two? I’ve got the big shareholder’s meeting in April and waiting until May just seems like we’re drawing it out, don’t you think?” He said pulling a face. “I know weddings are supposed to be a big deal but how long does it take to just buy a dress and order a cake?” He asked then made a noise of exasperation. “Fine, we’ll put a pin on it. I’m sure Alfred will have an idea; I’ll just have him handle all the details. However, just to be clear, we are getting married after we get finished with the whole courtship song and dance for Lucius, right?”

“Maybe,” she told him carefully.

“Maybe?” He repeated with a hint of outrage.

“Depends, I don’t know; probably,” she conceded. “If the dating thing works out then, sure. Why not?”

“Probably?” He spat the word out distastefully. “What the hell kind of answer is ‘probably’?”

“I don’t know, Bruce; what the hell kind of proposal is ‘we might as well just get this show on the road,’ followed by ‘Why can’t you just marry me without us having to go through the rest of that crap?’” She shot back.

“You…might have a point;” he conceded reluctantly. “I suppose I’m not very good at this whole ‘romance’ thing.”

“What about all those pictures in the gossip rags of you romancing starlets and supermodels over candlelit dinners?” She asked. “You looked pretty good at it from what I could see. Trust me; I’m not above a good bottle of wine and some candlelight, I promise. Try starting there and see what happens.”
“That was my cover,” he told her. “I was just pretending to be the playboy for the cameras because it was what the public expected to see. I don’t have to do that with you.”


He gave her an amused look, “First off, I don’t have to romance you to get your pants off,” he slid his hand up her bare thigh under the covers and squeezed her bottom suggestively, “But what I was referring to was the ‘pretending’ part.” His voice took on a tender quality. Looking deeply into her eyes he said, “I may not be the most romantic guy in the world but that’s because I don’t have to pretend with you.” He stroked his finger down her cheek and smoothed it across her bottom lip where she had been unconsciously biting it. “I don’t have to put on a show with you because you already know me just like I know you. You’re where I live; you’re home.”

She blinked at him; the breath leaving her lungs, then grabbed his shoulders and hauled him against her in a passionate kiss. He followed her lead, lifting her from his lap then laying her on her back and maneuvering himself until he was cradled between her thighs, his hardening sex nudging at her center.

He ended the kiss and looked down at her tenderly, “Not that I’m complaining, but what was that for?”

“For saying something incredibly romantic,” she told him before pulling his mouth back down to hers.

It was quite some time before they were able to finish their conversation.
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Two

Around mid-morning, after another vigorous round of lovemaking and a long shower filled with a lot of suggestive scrubbing, they reentered the bedroom to hear Felicity’s cell buzzing angrily on the nightstand.

Wrapped in an oversized towel she walked over to her cell to read her texts. “Crap,” she grimaced. “What is it?” Bruce asked from across the room where he was picking them both out some underwear in a somewhat self-satisfied way. He’d begun acting differently ever since she had tentatively agreed to try to go the distance with their relationship. It wasn’t a bad thing, just a little disconcerting. For example, when they heard her phone go off the first time after they stepped out of the shower, she’d noticed that he’d started using some very different possessive pronouns like:

“Go check your messages and I’ll pick you out something from *our* dresser so we can get dressed and then we’ll get something to eat.”

Something told her that Bruce’s idea of going slow and hers were two very different things.

“It’s Tam,” she told him. “Dad called her and asked her if I spent the night at her place.”

“And?” He asked as he tossed a bra and a pair of panties on the bed for her before pulling on a pair of boxer briefs and an undershirt then grabbing a pair of socks and sitting on the bed beside her to put them on.

“She covered for me but now she wants details,” she grimaced.

“Details, huh?” He grinned at her naughtily. “Be sure to paint me in a flattering light. I’m going into the closet; I’m pretty sure they hung the rest of your clothes in there as well but I’ll let you know,” he said as he gave her a quick peck on the lips before getting up and heading towards the large walk-in.

“Hey, bring me out an outfit if you find something. I don’t care what it is as long as it’s warm,” she told him as she texted Tam back.

“Should I feel flattered that you trust me enough to pick out your clothes for you or is this some kind of relationship test?” Bruce asked her with a raised eyebrow.

“You spend your life in Armani; I have a feeling that you have better taste than I do,” she said distractedly.
“That or I’m just not interested enough in clothes to hire a different tailor,” he told her. “Jeans and a sweater okay?”

“Yeah, and boots,” she called out as he left the room. “God, I hope they delivered the shoes, too. I really don’t want to have to wear heels today,” she muttered as she sent the text.

Her phone rang a split second later.

“You slept with Bruce again?” Tam screeched in her ear so loud that she had to hold the phone away from her ear.

“And good morning to you,” Felicity said to her sister with an aggrieved sigh.

“What? How? Was it a booty call? Did you actually booty call Bruce?” Tam asked excitedly. “Was it good? I bet it was good; it was good wasn’t it?”

“No, I did not ‘booty call’ Bruce,” she told her. “We ran into each other when he was on patrol and…stuff happened. As for the rest of it; no comment.”

“Is that Felicity?” Came Tim’s voice. “What am I saying? Of course it’s Felicity. Who else would be booty calling Bruce?” He made a noise of disgust, “Oh God, I really hate that I just said that out loud.”

“It was not a booty call,” Felicity repeated.

“Felicity said to tell you it wasn’t a booty call,” Tam told him.

“Good to know,” came Tim’s muted reply. “Hearing that your sister can still respect Bruce the morning after she has sex with him is what I live for. By the way, have I mentioned how much I really hate hearing this crap yet? Do I have conversations with Dick over your dad’s sex life where you have to hear about it?” He paused, “Great, now I have to brush my teeth; just saying that made my mouth feel dirty. Saying ‘your dad’ and ‘sex’ in the same sentence tastes like dirty sweat socks.”

“Shut up, Tim!” She shot back, “What kind of sex was it?”

“What; like positions and stuff?” Felicity sputtered.

“Oh yeah, positions! Does he only do missionary or did he go all Snoop Doggie Bruce on you? Hey, has he tried to cross into the dark side yet because you did give him that bottle of lube--?”

“I don’t want to hear this!” Tim yelled from the other end of the line. “Putting my fingers in my ears; la lala la la!”

“I’m not talking about this with you right now, Tam! Bruce is in the next room!” Felicity told her then lowered her voice, “But, for the record, he’s very, um, versatile.”

“Oooh!” She squealed. “How versatile? Are we talking full Kama Sutra? Is he like Sting? Not bald Sting who looks like somebody’s grumpy old grandfather but like late 80’s, early 90’s totally pretentious but still hot Sting with the 24 hour boner and the tantric sex? He looks like he could be all into that tantric stuff. Is it all yoga and clean living or does he have to pop a pill for that?”

“Just kill me,” Tim moaned piteously.

“And what kind of sex was it? I mean like was it all tender and loving or was it dirty and wha-pow ‘who’s your daddy’? OOOH! Does he like it when you call him ‘daddy’ in the sack? Like ‘Oh, do
me Daddy Bruce!” because that could actually be kind of sexy in a slightly wrong but really hot and kinky kind of way.”

“I will sign over my entire trust fund and every share of stock in my portfolio if you will Just. Stop. Talking,” Tim told her. “Please, for the love of God, just stop!” Came the muffled pleas.

“Oh, was it angry revenge sex? Tell me it was angry revenge sex! Angry revenge sex is HOT! I bet Bruce just gets all up in there and--”

“That’s it!” Tim shouted and she could hear the sound of the mattress springs as he got out of the bed. “I’m going to take a shower and scrub every inch of my body now! I might even have to use the Comet under the sink!”

“You big baby! Save me some hot water!” Tam called after him. “But seriously, it was angry revenge sex, wasn’t it?”

“It was not angry revenge sex!” Felicity told her. “Where do you get this stuff? And, by the way, Sting never really said that; it’s an urban myth.”

Bruce walked back into the room with some of her clothes on a hanger and an amused look on his face, “Angry revenge sex, huh? Your sister definitely has a way with words.”

“Tell me about it,” she muttered. “Look, Bruce just walked into the room. Let me get dressed and I’ll call you back,” she told her.

“No, don’t hang up!” Tam shouted over the receiver, “I want details! How naked is he right now?”

Felicity rolled her eyes and hit ‘end call’ as she admired Bruce’s outfit; a Caspian blue traditional Irish cable knit sweater, a pair of dark denim boot cut jeans, black boots, and a black leather jacket. It was rare that she got to see him dressed so casually but it suited him.

He caught her appreciative gaze and grinned, “Hope you like what I picked out. I figured you might want to pick the shoes though.”

“If I must,” she sighed mockingly. She snatched up the clothes and underwear he laid out for her and headed out of the room to change.

“You don’t have to leave on my account,” he told her.

“Right, so you can jump me the minute the towel comes off?” She tossed out over her shoulder. “Not likely. I’m hungry and there’s no food here.”

“Not even officially engaged yet and you’re already cutting me off?” He called out after her.

“Suck it up, Bruce,” she retorted before heading into the bathroom.

“Guess that means the honeymoon’s over,” he said just before she shut the door between them.

A few minutes later she was brushing her hair into a shimmering golden fall of loose curls and examining herself in the mirror. She didn’t have many cosmetics with her but she managed to find some lip gloss and a tube of mascara in her purse. Bruce had picked out a pair of artfully faded medium wash jeans and a cream colored Burberry Brit V-neck cardigan among the things she’d purchased the other day. While the sweater looked deceptively modest on the hanger, the fine wool clung to her curves and the low neckline plunged to dangerous depths. She admired her reflection in the mirror and grinned; her smallish bosom was proudly displayed by the cream silk push up bra.
Bruce had unwittingly chosen. Her ‘32B’ girls were feeling more like perky ‘32C’s’ today.

She padded out of the room barefoot and walked over to his dresser, fully aware of how the body conscious True Religion jeans hugged her form in all the right places. “Mind if I borrow a pair of wool socks? All I have is stockings,” she called out to him. He was lying back on the bed with his tablet, probably checking his email.

“Sure, no—” He paused suddenly and she turned toward him so he could get the full effect, “problem.”

“Thanks for picking out the outfit, Bruce,” she told him as she headed towards the closet with a pair of his wool boot socks in her hand. “You really do have excellent taste.”

“Yeah, apparently I do,” he said in a dangerously low tone as he tossed aside his tablet and followed her into the closet.

She sat down on the padded leather bench in the large walk-in closet that was almost the size of her old living room and put on the socks before reaching for a pair of low-heeled chestnut brown riding boots. He watched her with hooded eyes, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned carelessly against the doorframe. His gaze fixed on the glimpse of skin that was exposed when she bent over and her sweater rode up, then down the curve of her derriere which was emphasized by the designer jeans.

“I could get used to this,” he told her with a naughty glint in his eye as she stood up to face him.

“Used to what?” She asked as she reached into one of the zippered garment bags for a wool and silk blend charcoal grey Armani pea coat since her other coat was currently stained with blood.

She was still pissed about that; she really liked that coat.

“Sharing closet space, lending you my socks; being domestic. Watching you bend over in those jeans;” he added with a muted leer.

“This is domestic to you?” She laughed as she walked into his embrace and he kissed her softly.

“Well, it’s the closest to it I’ve ever come,” he told her with another kiss.

“Domestic isn’t borrowing a pair of socks; domestic is when someone tells you to pick up diapers and milk over the coms and you have to walk into the corner bodega suited up,” she teased.

“Diapers, huh?” He said, “That reminds me; you and I still have a few things to discuss, don’t we?”

“It was just a joke, Bruce,” she said with a snort. “I like kids but I know how you feel about them so right now it’s not an issue for me. Especially since we’re not even up to our second date yet.”

“I know that, but…” His eyes took on a cast of vulnerability, “Look, I don’t want you to get the wrong idea and have this become a big issue between us later. We were joking earlier, but I meant it when I said I would consider having kids with you if that’s what you wanted. I realize looking back on it that I might have seemed flippant or unenthusiastic about it but that’s because…” He ran his fingers through his hair and frowned, “It’s not that I don’t like children or that I don’t want to give you the opportunity to have a child of your own; I just don’t think I’d be a very good father. I’m not sure I’m even capable of it.”

“Because of Damian?” She asked him.
“And Dick, Tim, Jason, Cassie; I was never a father to any of them, really,” he told her. “On paper I was their legal guardian but I didn’t actually raise any of them. I didn’t do Christmas morning or birthday parties, I didn’t go to school plays, or engage in any sort of normal family activities with them. Anything like that was taken care of by Alfred. On holidays he had to remind me what day it was half the time and, even then, I barely paused long enough to acknowledge it. I can’t even use the excuse that they were too old for that sort of thing. Dick and Tim were both pretty young when I adopted them; not even teenagers yet, Jason was just slightly older than that at thirteen, Cassie was seventeen when I took her in but she was still a child in many ways.” He shook his head, his mood going grim. “I think I failed all of them really. Instead of acting like a father I was just a team leader and trainer; a taskmaster. I’m just worried that if we had children that I’d wind up hurting them and disappointing you.”

She stroked his cheek softly, “I appreciate you being so honest with me but we can hold off this discussion for a while, Bruce. We have time. And, when the time comes; if and when we *both* decide to have kids, I promise I won’t let you fall short, okay? Seriously though, it’s way too soon to start talking about children.”

“It’s not though; not really,” he told her. He took her by the hand and led her back to the bedroom where he sat them both back onto the bed. He turned to her slightly and caressed the back of her hand with his thumb, his eyes seeking out hers, “We’re kind of on a roll with this ‘talking things through first’ thing and I want to make sure we have it all out there before I take it to Lucius. I know him well enough to know he’s going to expect answers to any and every question and I want to make sure I go in prepared.”

She looked at him, “So, what you’re really saying is, you want me to help you formulate a ‘marriage protocol’ for my dad even though we’re not even close to the point where getting married is an actual thing yet?”

He actually had the decency to look slightly discomfited, “Basically, yes.”

“And why exactly do we have to do this right now?”

“You have met Lucius, right?” He said dryly.

“What is it with the Wayne men and my dad?” She said with a puzzled grin. “You guys act like he’s the Big Bad or something.”

Bruce rubbed the back of his neck ruefully, “Well, in this particular situation, he pretty much is.”

She rolled her eyes at him, “Fine. What do you want to talk about—and keep in mind, I’m hungry and that can be a dangerous thing.”

“I swear we’ll go eat in a minute but there are some things I just don’t want to talk about in public. Too many cellphone cameras and eavesdroppers in this part of town and Bruce Wayne is pretty high profile.”

“What is it with you masks and referring to yourselves in the third person?” Felicity asked in bemusement.

“I’m being serious,” he told her. “One hint of Bruce Wayne talking about marriage and kids with a mystery blonde and we won’t have to tell your dad anything.”

“You have a point,” she said faintly as she absorbed that. “Ask.”

“Do you want to get married eventually?” He asked then added quickly, “I know we already talked
about this but you kind of left it hanging and I want to make sure we’re on the same page. I don’t want there to be any room for misunderstandings between us so, at the risk of repeating myself, for the record that’s where I see this going. I know I come off as old-fashioned and unromantic but the fact is that I’m not 23 anymore and if we’re going to do this I’d rather we do it sooner rather than later. As it is people are going to take one look at our age gap and think, ‘midlife crisis’. I’d rather not wait until things get too obvious between us.” The corner of his lips quirked upwards, “That and I’d like to have a proper honeymoon without having to rely on pharmacological assistance.”

“You could hear Tam from inside the closet?” She asked him in surprise. “I guess those ears on your costume aren’t just for show then, huh?”

He looked at her in amusement, “Well, her voice does carry but I pretty much guessed that’s what she was referring to after I heard you talking about Sting and urban myths,” he told her before offering her a sensuous smirk. “And, for the record, tantric sex isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Really?” She asked, quirking an eyebrow at him. “And you would know that how exactly?”

He shrugged, “Simple logic; if it takes you that many hours to get the job done then you’re obviously not doing something right.”

“God, you’re an ass,” she snorted. “First off, technically there is hardly any age gap between us at all thanks to your leap into the Fountain of Youth, but I get what you’re saying. Secondly, if you get any more help in that regard I’m going to need pharmacological assistance,” she told him with a reassuring pat then paused to gather her thoughts. “I don’t want to jump into anything this big too quickly. If life has taught me anything it’s that I need to be more cautious about making big decisions but,” she looked at him, “if I was ever going to do this with anyone it would probably be with you.”

He started to lean toward her and she held out her hand to stop him, “That’s not to say we should pop off to do some ring shopping later; it means that I’m willing to try this with you and that I’m serious enough to go public with it. I think that’s a big enough step for both of us; for now, at least.”

“I was actually going to give you my mother’s ring; save a few bucks,” Bruce told her then grinned at her look of annoyance. “Understood, and I agree; reluctantly, but I can wait until you’re ready. Of course, I reserve the right to try to change your mind on the timeline so we can speed things up a bit,” he said with a mischievous quirk of his lips. “Now, about kids; how big an issue is this? And don’t say we’ll talk later because that’s one of the first questions your father will ask and I’d rather not have everyone at our child’s first school play ask me if I’m there for my grandchildren. Even if we got started within the next five years I’d be,” he paused to do the math, “sixty-four by the time they were ready for college.” He winced and rubbed his hand across his mouth. “Shit. That kind of puts things into perspective, doesn’t it?”

“You’d be a good looking sixty-four,” she said lightly as she offered him a supportive smile. “Technically, you’d be more like a young looking fifty; fifty-four tops. Plus you’d be married to a hot forty-six year old MILF.”

He wasn’t buying it though. He looked at her, his eyes dark with apprehension, “Time is not on our side, Felicity. Even with a ten year free pass, doing what I do…”

“Okay, then…yes,” she said, making up her mind. “I’ll call it and say that eventually I would like children but it isn’t a take it or leave it thing. If you don’t want kids then I can live without them. I mean, given what we do and the danger associated with it, having a kid is kind of crazy to begin with. The possibility of one of us becoming a single parent is pretty high and, whether you like it or not, as your wife and Batman’s partner I’m going to have a target on my back. Even if I stick to coms there is a possibility that the job of being the sole parent could fall to you. If you aren’t all in then it isn’t worth it.”
“I get what you’re saying,” he said in a subdued and thoughtful tone. “Look, I’ve…I’ve been giving this some thought but now that it’s a definite thing between us, or near enough anyway, I think I should probably start planning to hand the cowl over to Dick and take a less physical role in the team.”

“Really?” She said, blinking in surprise.

“Yes, really,” he nodded solemnly. “Before the ‘dip in the Fountain of Youth’ as you called it, I was looking at a double knee replacement and surgery on my rotator cuff so I was probably going to have to hand it off anyway. When I got back the ten years that changed and Dick wasn’t very happy about it but Damian was gone and I had nothing else but the Bat to keep me going so I kept the cowl. Now though,” he took her hand in his own and squeezed, “I don’t want to throw that time away when I could be spending it with you. If you want kids then we’ll have kids,” as she opened her mouth he cut her off, “and I will be a willing parent to them. I might need help and I can’t promise I won’t screw it up, but I’ll do it as long as it’s with you.”

“What about adoption?” She asked him.

“Obviously I’m good with that,” he told her dryly. “But if you’re asking if I’m hung up on the idea of having a biological child or an infant the answer is no. If you want to adopt I’m fine with it. Do you want to adopt?”

“Maybe,” Felicity told him. “I could see adopting a child. I was adopted and you kind of were so, yeah. Still, if we do eventually decide to have any biological children we need to have a genetic screening done.”

“Because of the Lazarus Pits?” He asked her. “Like I told you, I already had all that done and I’m fine but if you’re worried about it…”

“No, it’s for me actually,” she told him. “I don’t know much about my genetic history, so…”

“Okay,” he nodded. “We’ll get tested together and if there’s a problem we’ll just adopt. If we’re both healthy and there are no problems then we can still adopt; whatever you want to do is fine by me.”

“And you’re sure about that? You’d be happy doing all of it?” She asked him. “Not just kids but giving up the Bat?”

He gave a noncommittal grimace, “It’s not a matter of my happiness as much as it is a fact of life. I’m not a metahuman; I’m a normal man. All the skills I have come from training and effort. My experience in the Pit gave me back a lot of my stamina and fixed several issues that I had been putting off surgery for, but this life is hard on a person physically. In a lot of ways the Pit gave me a second chance and I would like to retire before I’m forced to. I don’t want to find myself in a wheelchair again; this time permanently.” He looked away and appeared to gather his thoughts, “Okay.”

“Okay what?” She asked.

“Okay to kids,” he said although there was still a bit of tension in his voice. “Okay to retiring; all of it, but not in five years. I don’t want to wait that long. If we do this then I want to ramp up the timeline. I know you want to take it slow for Lucius but…look, let’s just do it. I’ll talk to Lucius, try to convince him to see it our way, and then we’ll get married. If you’re serious about kids then I’d like not to have to wait on that either. I agree we should give ourselves time to settle into being married but I don’t want to put it off longer than a year, two tops, before we start trying. I’d rather be fifty-nine than sixty-four when our kid gets his or her diploma, so even though I’m still probably
going to be the oldest dad at kindergarten, if we can shave at least a few years off then I’m down.”

“Bruce, I’m not going to force you to have children if you don’t want them,” she told him plainly.

“I want them,” he told her as he leaned forward to catch her lips in a brief kiss. He leaned his forehead against hers, “I want this. Like I said, I can’t promise I won’t make mistakes but if anyone is going to be fathering your children it had better be me. Who knows; if we start trying on our honeymoon maybe our kid will be in kindergarten before I get my AARP membership card,” he said drolly.

“Oh,” she said, sitting back suddenly.

“What?” He asked with a frown before realization dawned in his expression. “We didn’t use a condom. Damn it,” he swore. “I swear, I have never in my life been this careless. I devolve into an irresponsible teenager around you for some reason! What the hell is wrong with me all of the sudden?” He reached over into the nightstand and grimaced as he looked inside. “It doesn’t matter because apparently, even if I had been thinking with the right head last night, we didn’t have any condoms.”

“No condoms in the bachelor pad?” She smirked, momentarily distracted. “That’s both surprising and disappointing. I just figured that since you make a point of keeping the bed ready for action, you’d have the maid service replenish those as well.”

“It’s not really a bachelor pad,” he told her, still sounding disgusted with himself. “Plus, it’s been a while for me so I haven’t bought them in a very long time.” he looked up at her with a tinge of embarrassment.

“Really?” Felicity asked in surprise. “How long? Not since we…?”

“No,” he sighed. “I wish I could tell you that there hasn’t been anyone else since you and I were together but I can’t. I didn’t exactly go out and find someone right away but I wasn’t celibate. Mostly one night stands but I did date a few people. My last ‘relationship’ was about ten months ago, give or take. I had a brief romance with a journalist named Charlotte Rivers. It wasn’t even a ‘romance’. Charlotte was,” he curled his lips into a rueful grimace, “expedient with her affairs; she wasn’t exactly a cuddly type of girl. She was more of an ‘I’ve got fifteen minutes so take off your pants’ kind of girl, but I wasn’t in the right headspace for more than that and it scratched an itch. She took a job in Paris and that was that,” he told her then exhaled roughly. “Is there a chance that you might be…”

“No,” she said quickly. “I had a depo shot; remember? Although, yeah, now that you mention it we weren’t exactly playing by the modern rules of safe sex so…”

“So there’s a chance that you’re…?” He let his voice trail off.

“There’s always a slight chance,” she told him ruefully, “but between the shot and the multiple doses of Plan B I’ve had to spend a fortune on lately I think it’s highly unlikely.”

“If you do get pregnant then all bets are off,” he said seriously. “No dating, no waiting, we get married, period. Right away and no more delays even if that means pissing off your family.”

“Are you sure you’re not trying to knock me up just to get out of dating?” Felicity asked him half-seriously because, he had a point, this was getting a bit ridiculous. Hell, she used to stuff rubbers in Oliver’s suit on the sly when he was dating Sara and Laurel and yet she was still stuck shelling out $49.99 plus tax every time she opened her legs. Thank God she’d been smart enough to get the shot;
if she had kept this up for much longer she’d either be pregnant or broke.

“Don’t even joke about that.” He shot her a withering look, “Listen, I may be a pretty modern guy in most areas but I’m telling you right now if and when we do have kids, we’re getting married before they’re born. That’s not something I’m willing to compromise on.”

“I’m not arguing with you, but why?” Felicity asked him. “I mean, I never thought you were all that religious so…?”

“I’m not,” he told her. “I’m not an atheist but I’m not a bible thumper either. I just believe that if a man decides to have children with a woman then he should at least prove and protect that commitment by marrying her. I’m a grown up, not some kid who thinks getting a woman pregnant is something you can walk away from. I take responsibility for my actions. It’s a question of honor and respect to me and I know your father wouldn’t be happy if I started making babies with his daughter without taking accountability for that and stepping up to the plate like a real man.”

“You know, it’s times like these when I’m reminded of just how old you really are,” she mused.
He eyed her cuttingly, obviously unamused by her wisecrack, “Look, there’s nothing wrong with being a single mother raising children alone. I’m not making sweeping moral judgments or casting aspersions on your mother for having you out of wedlock but, if you and I have a baby, I want to be married to you. I’m sorry, but that’s just the way it is,” he told her. “Family is one thing I don’t mess around with. My children will have my name and I want to be married to their mother when that happens.”

“That’s…reasonable,” she conceded. “Okay, if I do get pregnant; and I have absolutely no intentions of doing so, we’ll go to the closest all night wedding chapel and Elvis can make our little Chrysanthemum or Churchill legitimate. Happy?”

“Betsy or Thomas,” he reminded her.

“Betsy or Thomas,” she agreed. “Unless it’s twins and then Churchill and Chrysanthemum are back on the table because that is just too big of a coincidence to ignore.”

“No,” he told her with a note of finality.

“You came up with the names,” she reminded him.

He crossed his arms stubbornly and glowered at her.

“For a guy who was so opposed to marriage and kids not too long ago you’ve really gotten ridiculous with this stuff, you know that? No sense of humor whatsoever; I’m seriously wondering if you haven’t been taken over by bodysnatchers,” she said with a smirk. “Fine; Chrys and Church are off the table.”

His features softened in contemplation, “Chrys and Church don’t sound that bad, I suppose. On second thought…”

“I’m going to punch you in the face if you keep it up,” she told him flatly.

“Okay, subject closed,” he told her with a small upturn of his lips to let her know he was having her on. “So what was the ‘Oh’ about then?”

“I just remembered I have a date with Jake this Friday,” she told him.
“No, you don’t,” he told her firmly.

“He’s leaving in a couple of weeks anyway—”

“No,” he told her again, this time with a tinge of anger in his voice.

“So the whole ‘exclusive’ thing starts now?” She asked dryly.

“The exclusive thing started the minute you returned to Gotham,” he told her. “He’s lucky he even got the one lunch date as far as I’m concerned and he’s even luckier he just got a hamburger out of the deal. More than that and I would have opened an office in Antarctica just so I could transfer him to it.”

“I guess I’ll have to call him then,” she sighed.

“Do that, and don’t bother letting him down easy,” he told her. “If you don’t think you can manage it, I’ll place a call and have someone from the planning division start buying up real estate around the polar icecaps.”

“Stop it; he’s a really nice guy,” she told him.

“I don’t care,” he shot back. “He’s sniffing around my woman and I’m not okay with that.”

“‘Your woman’, huh?” She snorted. “I’ve only been ‘your woman’ for a few hours and you’re already getting territorial?”

He reached out and pulled her across his lap, dipping her low and causing her to squeak in surprise, before capturing her lips in a Hollywood style kiss. When they came up for air he gave her a triumphant grin, “You’ve always been mine, Baby; or do you still need convincing?”

“I got it, thanks,” she said breathlessly as he tugged her upright and sat her back down again. She smoothed her hands over her stomach and caught her breath. “Okay, so I guess I’m calling Jake then.”

“I guess you are,” he said with an arrogant upturn of his lips.

“So when are you planning on breaking the news to my dad?” She asked and watched as his arrogance immediately deflated.

He rubbed his hand over his mouth and gave her an uncertain look, “I suppose I had better get this over with sooner rather than later, huh?”

“I’ll call Jake tomorrow if you’ll come to my dad’s place for dinner on Tuesday,” she told him. “I know you guys have board meetings on Mondays so that’ll give you a couple of days to prepare, make out a will, whatever.”

“Funny,” He said unenthusiastically. “Fine; dinner on Tuesday with the future father-in-law for meatloaf and interrogation.”

“Peggy won’t make Dad meatloaf anymore unless it’s got tofu in it. It’ll probably be roast chicken or fish. Oh, that reminds me, don’t forget about Peggy Ann,” she told him. “She’s going to have more questions than Dad and a big one is going to be whether or not you intend to convert.”

“I didn’t think you and Lucius were all that religious,” he said with a frown.

“We’re not, and neither is Peggy Ann really, but it’s still a thing with her,” Felicity shrugged.
“How do you feel about it?” Bruce asked cautiously.

“I say we tell them that if we have children we’ll just be a multi-cultural family and raise our kids in the traditions of both families then leave it as is. You have to admit, if anyone can understand that one it’s my family,” she told him.

“What about christening?” He asked.

“Is that important to you?” She asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Kind of,” he said reluctantly. “Not for religious reasons though; more for the sake of tradition. The Wayne Family has always had christenings at First Episcopal; we even have a plaque on the baptismal font.”

“Did any of your other kids get christened?”

“They were all teenagers or near enough when I adopted them,” he said dryly. “Christening is something you only do with babies. I’m pretty sure Dick was christened because his family was Romani and Catholic, Tim’s family has been a fixture in Gotham for almost as long as the Wayne’s and the Kane’s so he was probably christened at St. Luke’s or Gotham Cathedral, and I have no idea if Jason or Cassie were but I doubt it.”

“Okay, fair enough.” She looked at him quizzically, “Just out of curiosity, when was the last time you actually went to church? And, before you answer that, funerals and weddings don’t count.”

Bruce pulled a face, “It’s been a while.”

“How many decades is ‘a while’?” She asked him.

“A little over three,” he admitted.

“I don’t think this is going to be an issue,” she said dryly. “Look, if you want to have our unborn theoretical children christened in a church that you don’t actually attend, then that’s fine by me. That said however, I don’t intend to take up religion. If you want to go, fine; I’ll show up for the big things and help decorate the tree, but I consider myself an agnostic at best. I get tradition though; it’s why I still celebrate Hanukah even if I don’t necessarily buy into the rest of it. Frankly, if I was so concerned with that kind of stuff I wouldn’t be discussing this with a turtleneck versus crew neck kind of guy.”

“A what?” He looked at her in confusion until she stared pointedly at his lap, “Ah, right; turtleneck. Understood; yet another reason why I’m not enthusiastic about the prospect of converting to Judaism.” He took a deep breath, “Okay, marriage, mission, kids, religion; I think that’s everything, the big stuff anyway. When should we start this whole dating thing?”

“I don’t know; whenever you want to, I guess.” She got up from the bed and reached for her purse, “We could call brunch ‘Official Date Number Two’,” she suggested.

“I meant officially so the papers can report that Bruce Wayne is off the market,” he told her.

“Off the market?” She repeated, “And again with the creepy third person; what is it with you guys?” She muttered. “I don’t know; just pick something and let me know if I have to wear an evening gown.”

“The Charity Gala at the Wayne Foundation?” He asked as he got up to follow her out. “Everyone in Gotham society and all the papers will be there so it’s perfect.”
She flinched and turned to him slowly, a pained expression on her face, “Yeah, um, I kind of already have plans.”

“What do you mean?” He asked, his good humor quickly fading.

“I was sort of already going with someone,” she told him reluctantly.

“You know, I was kidding earlier but if you tell me you intend to go to the fundraiser with Jake after all this, then I’m really going to start to get pissed,” he told her.

“It’s not with Jake; it’s with someone else,” she said vaguely.

He scowled, “How many men have you met since coming back to Gotham?”

“It’s not with a man,” she said rolling her eyes.

“Is it your friend, Sara? Can’t Luke take her if they’re together?”

“It’s not Sara,” she said.

“I see. You, um, hit on that earlier but I wasn’t… I didn’t think you were…” He cleared his throat and looked at her uncertainly, “Listen Baby, while I realize that the idea of watching two women together or having multiple partners simultaneously is a common fantasy among men, that sort of thing has never really interested me. I’ve had plenty of opportunities to indulge in threesomes in the past and, while I don’t have a problem with what other people do behind closed doors, I don’t like sharing and I certainly don’t like an audience. I’m a one woman at a time kind of guy and, whether it’s with a man or a woman, I’m not really okay with you seeing someone else if we’re going to move forward with this relationship.”

“I’m not--!” She shot him a dirty look, “You can be a real ass, you know that?” She scowled. “It’s not a date-date and, even if it were, what makes you think you’d be invited along as an active participant?”

“If you’re having sex with anybody I’m at least going to be in the same room,” he told her.

“I hate you so much right now,” she told him. “And, by the way, are you sure Tim isn’t your biological son? Because between the physical resemblance and the way your minds just automatically seem to go there, I’m starting to wonder if you and Janet Drake were more than just next door neighbors.”

He quirked his lips wryly and tilted his head noncommittally.

“Seriously?” She blinked, her jaw dropping in surprise.

“Let’s just say that Jack was often away for business and Janet was both a very friendly neighbor and a lovely hostess,” he told her.

“I can’t decide if you’re kidding right now and that’s scaring me,” she said slowly.

“Who exactly is this person you’re taking to the Gala?” He asked her, evading the question.

“It’s…my supervisor from my new job,” she said cagily.

“The job for which you have yet to share any details about,” he stated.

“That would be the one,” she said pursing her lips.
“Don’t you think now would be a good time to start?” He asked her.

“Do I have to?” She asked him hopefully.

“I think if we’re going to be officially dating that people might wonder how it is that I don’t know where my girlfriend works,” he told her.

“I thought you didn’t like using terms like ‘girlfriend’ and ‘boyfriend’?” She pointed out.

“I wanted to use the term fiancée but someone insisted we ‘date’ first,” he shot her a look of annoyance, “Just tell me already; I promise I won’t try to interfere with your career.”

“It’s, um, called the Orbital Organization,” she told him using the cover Sara had provided the night before.

He frowned, “The Orbital Organization? What is that; a new software start-up?”

“Sort of,” she said quickly. “Hey listen, it’s getting late and if we don’t leave soon it’s going to be lunch time and you know how much I like brunch—”

“Felicity,” he said warningly.

“Fine,” she told him with an uncaring shrug. “It’s a charity, okay?”

He looked at her impassively, “A charity that can pay the numbers you told me the other day?”

“I may have exaggerated the numbers a bit,” she lied.

He crossed his arms and glowered at her as though he were dressed in head to toe black armor instead of a very expensive hand-knit sweater and jeans, “Is this a charity or is it a ‘charity’?” He asked her.

She squeezed her eyes shut, “Is there a difference?”

“You’re working for a vigilante op?” He said accusingly in the voice of the Bat. “Who’s running it and how did they recruit you?”

“I don’t suppose we could table this discussion until after we eat?” She asked hopelessly.

“Talk!” He growled.

“You’re not going to like it,” she told him.

“That’s a given,” he bit out. “Is it Stellmoor? Tell me you aren’t running your own op and engaging Isabel Rochev. Tell me you aren’t being that stupid!”

Now he was pissing her off. ‘Stupid’ in any of its forms was a trigger for her Loud Voice to come out to play. “It isn’t stupid! It makes perfect sense!”

“So it is Stellmoor?” Bruce said in a Loud Voice of his own, his face darkening in anger. “You are going to drop this immediately, do you hear me? This ends now!”

“Excuse me?” She said, dropping her purse and narrowing her eyes at him. She stepped forward, not the least bit intimidated by the growing shadow of the Bat, her voice falling to an icy registry, “You just listen up and you listen good, I may be in love with you Bruce, but you do not get to tell me what to do; not now and not ever. That’s not how this works, so you had better get used to that right
now. If you want someone who obeys you then get a dog because if you think that I will ever allow you to push me around then you have another thing coming.”

“I’m trying to keep you safe,” he bit out.

“Well, you can’t,” she told him.

“The hell I can’t!” He exploded.

“No, you can’t!” She shot back, “And if you would just shut the hell up and stop posturing like some kind of chauvinistic macho schmuck and actually listen to me then you’d understand what it is I’m doing and why!”

“So talk!” He ordered as he loomed above her, his arms crossed in front of his puffed out chest.

“Stellmoor is a front for a worldwide vigilante group of mostly female operators. The set up is… impressive doesn’t even begin to cover it,” she shook her head in emphasis. “It blows anything I’ve ever seen out of the water. We’re talking independent satellite access, free access to international military and law enforcement servers, fully equipped bases of operation all over the globe with advanced training facilities, medical, Cyber-ops control rooms with top of the line tech, the works. They fund themselves through a series of shell corps, legitimate businesses, and independent contracts; the funds from which they can launder themselves and not have to go through an intermediary. These people have obviously studied every kind of group from military to shadow op to vigilante setup, weeded out the weaknesses of each, and it’s left them with a system that makes the Batcave and ARGUS look like something you’d find digging around a box of Cracker Jacks,” she let that sink in for a minute as she looked him in the eye. “Their security is equally impressive; twelve man sniper teams plus perimeter guards working in rotating shifts, top of the line infra-red range finders and sniper rifles, laser netting and sensors, shielded equipment, and more tech than you can shake a stick at. In a word; it’s a vigilante tech nerd’s wet dream.”

“And how do you know all this?” He asked, his voice still tinged with anger but his eyes sharp as he listened intently.

“I was inside; they gave me the nickel tour.”

He stepped forward until he was in her space, “You went inside there without a backup?” He said menacingly. “When?”

“Last week,” she told him, not giving an inch. “And before you pop your cork, I knew it was risky as hell when I did it but I didn’t have any other choice.”

“That’s bullshit!” He exploded. “You should have told me and--!”

“And what? Let you bench me so you could strong-arm your way inside and go all Bat on them?” She shot back.

“Yes!” He told her.

“Why?”

“Because you aren’t---!” He grimaced and turned his back on her as he wiped his hand over his mouth. He seemed to take a moment to get his thoughts in order before he faced her again, “You’re not a field operator, Felicity; you’re a tech. You belong in front of a monitor, not mixing it up with unknown enemy combatants!”
“I’m not an operator?” She repeated coolly.

“No, you aren’t,” he told her with equal iciness.

She nodded, “Okay,” she said as she picked up her purse and headed for the door.

“Fine,” Bruce said with a frown as he followed her out. “Let’s go eat.”

She stopped and turned to him slowly, “No, no I think you’ll go eat; I have other plans.”

“And what plans are those?” He asked, his brows drawing together as his temper began to build once more.

“Mine,” she told him.

“You’re not doing this,” Bruce told her quietly.

“Doing what?” She asked, her face devoid of emotion.

He pointed back to the bed they had shared just a short while ago, the covers still rumpled from sleep and passion, “I told you I loved you; I told you I wanted to marry you and have a life together! You are not going to run off in a snit and throw all of that away just because you’re pissed that I’m trying to keep you safe!”

She took a step toward him, her eyes sharp and cold, “It’s not about how much you love me, Bruce, and it’s not about keeping me safe.”

“Then what is it about then?” He asked angrily.

“Respect,” she told him.

“What the hell does respect have to do with anything? How is me trying to protect you from getting yourself killed the same as disrespecting you?” He demanded forcefully.

“Who do you see when you look at me, Bruce?” She asked him.

“What?” He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Who do you see?” She asked him again.

“Who do you see?” She asked him again.

“You,” he scowled. “Who the hell else would I be looking at?”

She shook her head, “No, you don’t. You see ‘Baby’; you see the girl I used to be, but you don’t see me.” She advanced another step until they were nearly toe to toe, “The girl you knew has been gone a long time; she died in a basement along with five hundred and three other people over three and a half years ago.”

“What are you talking about?” He asked, searching her face. “The Glades terrorist attack? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Five hundred and three people died that day because of me,” she said with quiet anger. “I did that; every life lost that day is on me.”

“Malcolm Merlyn killed those people,” he said, his voice going from anger to confused concern. “It wasn’t your fault.”
She shook her head, “It was my fault and do you know why? Because I was so busy running away from the life I’d left behind, so busy hiding in plain sight, that instead of telling my team who I was and what I was capable of doing, I allowed Oliver to talk me out of leaving the Foundry and disabling the earthquake device like I had planned. Instead of doing what I should of done, I let him lead; I let him tell me to stay put and ‘be safe’. I knew it was a bad call, I knew it the minute he told me to stay it was a mistake and that I should have done it anyway, but I caved; I worked against my instincts. I wasted precious time recruiting Quentin Lance to go after the device in my place. I had to slow talk him through deactivating it when I could have done it in less than half the time. By the time he was done, the second device activated and those people died.” She tapped her chest twice, “I did that; that was on me, and Oliver still to this day thinks it was the right call because he doesn’t know any better. Even now, even though he knows who I am and what I did before I joined the team, he thinks it was better to save my life than the lives of five hundred and three other people including a man he thought of as a brother.”

“And, for once, he’s right,” Bruce said quietly, his hands coming up to rub her arms gently as he looked down at her. “I understand what you’re feeling—”

“Do you?” She asked.

He squeezed her arms, “Yes,” he told her firmly.

She shook her head again, “You’re wrong.”

“I understand survivor’s guilt, Felicity; probably more than anyone else on the planet,” he told her as he fixed her with his penetrating gaze. “The adult me understands that I was only eight years old and that there was nothing I could do to save my parents that night in the alley, but that guilt and anger is what created the Bat.” He pulled her closer to him, his head dipping close to he could look her directly in the eye, “You don’t have anything to prove; you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“It’s not survivor’s guilt, Bruce,” she told him. “This is about me learning a hard lesson; it’s about me learning to stand on my own two feet and doing what needs to be done.” She pulled away from him, her eyes searching his face, “I let someone convince me to go against my better judgment because I had no faith in myself and, as a result, there are now children out there without parents, husbands without wives, and families who are now devastated. I don’t feel guilty, Bruce; it’s not about guilt. It’s about moving forward and not needing anyone to save me because I am fully capable of doing that for myself. It’s about trusting my instincts and following through.”

“It’s about you thinking that you have to prove yourself or make up for something that wasn’t your fault!” He said insistently. “Listen to me; you aren’t responsible for that. Malcolm Merlyn killed those people; not you. You’re not a killer.”

She smiled; a small ironic smile that failed to reach her eyes, “Sara told me something her sister shared with her a few years back. It was something Helena Bertinelli told her and, given the subject matter, I’m pretty sure she knew what she was talking about. She said that once you let the darkness in, it consumes you.”

“Meaning?” He asked.

“Meaning that even if I’m not responsible for the deaths of the first five hundred and three people on my list, I’m still, by your definition, a killer. I’ve taken lives, Bruce; more than once.”

“What are you talking about?” He asked, his face darkening with anger.
She ignored the question, “This isn’t about you or Oliver; it’s about me. Not only did they know
Oliver’s setup but they knew yours; your cover, your ops, everything. They’d known it for years.”

“They said that?” He asked in the low timbre of the Bat.

She nodded, “They even said they tried sending out feelers to you but that you have a habit of
driving out anyone you feel is intruding on your territory.”

“That never happened,” he told her. “No one from Stellmoor has ever approached me!”

“How would you know, Bruce?” She asked him. “You shut everyone out, push everyone away, and
for what? What has all that negativity and isolation done for you?” She looked on him sadly, “They
weren’t trying to get to you or Oliver; this was all about me.”

“If that’s true then the last thing you need to do is walk right into their hands!” He insisted. “You’re a
goddamn genius, Felicity; why can’t you see what’s right in front of your face?”

“What I see is, whether I’m being singled out as a potential asset or as a target, either way; I’m the
only person who can find out what’s really going on.”

He reacted strongly to that, “Wrong! My team--!”

“Couldn’t get inside that facility with a tank and a full battalion of masks behind you, whereas I can
walk through the front door,” she told him coldly. “Either you respect my abilities and my
intelligence enough to know that what I’m doing is the right call or you don’t. If you don’t then this
conversation is over.”

“And if I say that I think you’re wrong?” He threw back.

“Then we have nothing more to say to one another,” she told him, her eyes flashing dangerously.
“I’m doing this.”

“And whether you like it or not, I’m not letting you get yourself killed!” He said loudly, his
frustration reaching a fiery peak. “You can try to kick me out of your life all you want but I’m not
letting you go in there again!”

“And I’m not asking for your permission and the only person kicking you out of my life is yourself,”
she told him. “I’m going to work for Stellmoor so you can either get behind me or get out of the way.
Goodbye Bruce,” she said before turning on her heel and heading out.

“You aren’t doing this,” he called out after her.

“Watch me,” she said before shutting the door behind her.
Chapter Thirty-Three

Felicity rang Tam’s doorbell, her defiance giving way to depression the second she hit the sidewalk in front of the Wayne Foundation Building after leaving Bruce. From there it was a brief taxi ride to Tam’s condo filled with doubt and self-recrimination.

Tim opened the door suddenly and looked at her in surprise, “Hey.”

“Hey, Tam in?”

“She ran out to brunch with some of her friends,” he told her.

“Oh,” Felicity said morosely. “Okay then…” she started to leave.

“Where are you going?” Tim asked with a frown.

Felicity gestured towards the elevator, “You said Tam was…”

“So what am I, chopped liver?” He asked in a hurt tone.

“No, but--”

“Get in here,” he told her, holding the door open.

“You sure?” Felicity asked uncertainly.

“Yeah,” Tim snorted. “I was just making a sandwich; want one?” He said, walking away from the open door obviously intending her to follow.

She bit her lip and walked inside, shutting the door behind her. She looked around curiously. It had been a few years since she’d been inside Tam’s condo and her sister redecorated like some people changed their shoes. The last time she’d been home was three years ago following the Glades disaster when Oliver had taken his five month long ‘tropical vacation’. She’d given herself all of two weeks to rest and regroup before going back to Starling to rebuild. A lot had changed since then, both in the apartment and in her. Since the last thing she wanted to do was indulge in yet another round of self-torment however, she decided to concentrate on looking around the condo instead.
The last time she’d visited, Tam had been into Moroccan design; lots of orange and deep reds, rich colors that reminded you of exotic spice markets and heat. It had been cozy and comfortable with throw rugs and pillows everywhere, and low to the floor furnishings with punched tin lamps and star shaped black metal chandeliers. This time however, she had gone more modern contemporary.

Although her condo was a one bedroom it was still fairly large by Gotham standards and she lived in a very nice building in the Upper West Side just a hop, skip, and a jump from their father. Since Wayne Enterprises got its start in real estate and owned a huge chunk of the Gotham skyline (including the building they now occupied), she was able to secure an apartment close to the top floor. The large banks of windows in her living room looked out over the Gotham skyline and were framed by a white set of floor to ceiling vertical blinds which were currently open to let in the mid-morning sun. She had traded in the burnt orange from three years ago for deep aqua, lime green, and brilliant white walls. She’d replaced the low to the ground Moroccan style seating with a large white leather sectional with clean, blocky lines and tons of throw pillows in varying patterns of stripes, dots, solids, paisley, and exaggerated hound’s-tooth, all in coordinating shades of black, white, aqua, and lime green.

The rest of the furniture followed the same theme: modern aluminum floor lamps, funky shaped armless chairs, sleek dark wood tables, and deep shag cream and lime colored throw rugs. She had some art on the walls, mostly modern and abstract, but a few photos as well and all in oversized boxy black frames with wide white on white matting. All in all it was colorful, cozy, yet clean and modern: in a word, it was very Tam.

She followed Tim into the kitchen which, since the apartment was an open floor plan, basically meant that one second you were in the living room and the next you were in the kitchen with no real dividing line between the two. The same pale bamboo flooring in the living room continued unbroken into the kitchen which was done in a galley layout with a wall of cabinets alongside the far wall in sleek, shiny gloss white with blocky square drawer pulls and knobs, and a bright lime green backsplash that helped keep the flow of the house consistent. There was another free standing ‘wall’ of cabinets in front of the windows to add storage but it was open, on movable casters to make space for dinner parties, and didn’t really obstruct the view that much at all. The appliances were all brushed aluminum and, instead of an island or a bar, they had a freeform thick glass and chrome table with four chairs covered in white muslin fabric. Felicity glanced at the front of the large French door refrigerator that was wide open as Tim gathered up an armload of deli meats, cheeses, veggies, and condiments to spread along the counter. All over the front were dozens of photos, mostly of Tam and Tim, held in place by colorful button like magnets in the same aqua, lime green, and cream. They looked so happy and carefree it nearly brought her to her knees with longing.

“You two look so happy,” she said out loud as she walked up to get a better look. She ran her finger down a strip of photos of them laughing and kissing. “Did you take this in one of those booths like at the carnival?”

He looked over to the fridge and nodded, “Oh yeah, we went down to the Boardwalk last time she came to visit me in Bludhaven and must have taken a hundred of those things.” He shot her a naughty grin, “That was the only one we could risk putting on the fridge though. We’re lucky I had plenty of quarters and that it was the kind with a door instead of a curtain otherwise we might have gotten arrested.” He picked up a knife and gestured towards the sandwich fixings, “What do you want? I have Virginia baked ham, turkey, roast beef, salami, and bologna and then we’ve got Swiss, American, smoked Gouda, and provolone, plus the usual.” He said indicating the various jars of pickles, mayo, and brown mustard, plus lettuce and tomato.

“I’ll just have what you’re having,” she told him, not really interested in food at the moment but accepting it anyway.
“Okay, you asked for it,” he told her. “There’s soda and water in the fridge; help yourself.”

She went over to the fridge and pulled out a large bottle of Smart Water and offered one silently to Tim who nodded. She sat down at the glass table and opened her water as she watched him prepare their sandwiches. “Why didn’t you go with Tam to brunch?”

“She’s hanging with her friends,” he told her.

“Yeah,” Felicity said slowly. “And?”

He looked at her pointedly, “Have you met her friends?”

“You have a valid point,” Felicity said dryly.

“Why aren’t you at brunch?” Tim asked her as he sliced a tomato. “I figured you would have gone with Tam. Didn’t she invite you along?”

“Why would she?” Felicity asked, taking a sip from her water bottle.

He shrugged as he spread the mayo on the pumpernickel, “I don’t know; she said they were friends of you guys from prep. I think she said their names were Aubrey and Paisley something or other?”

“Yeah,” she said knowing exactly who he was referring to, “They weren’t my friends. Actually they aren’t really Tam’s ‘friends’, they’re more like ‘frenemies’ and Tam knows better than to invite me along to the bitchy version of the Ladies Who Brunch Hunger Games.”

“The what?” Tim snorted.

“Have you ever seen a member of the Gotham debutante society set eat?” She asked him.

He paused and frowned, “No.”

“Exactly,” she told him. “If I’m going to shell out $75 for a Sunday brunch prix fixe I’m going to eat and it would probably cause a riot or something so, no; no brunch for me.”

He put down the knife and shot her an incredulous look, “Then why go there?” He asked, honestly perplexed.

“Where did she say they were going?” She asked him.

“Uh, some place in the Village called The Laundry.”

“Yeah, you’re right, $75 was too low; try $140 bucks.”

He blinked at her, “Per person? For brunch?” He asked.

“Yup.”

“Brunch,” he repeated. “Basically a late breakfast with booze.”

“Uh huh,” she said taking another sip of water.

He shook his head, “Is the food good at least?” He asked.

“Did you miss the part where I said no one actually eats?” She asked slowly.

“Then why go there?” He asked, honestly perplexed.
“Obviously it’s so the right people can see you *not* eat brunch,” she told him blithely.

He blinked, “Women confuse the shit out of me,” he muttered turning back to the sandwiches and grabbing a couple of plates from the cabinet then brought them over to the table.

Felicity eyed her towering sandwich warily, “Um, what’s on it?”

“Everything,” he said, picking up half of his Dagwood Special and stuffing it into his mouth. “Now this is what I call brunch,” he garbled around a mouthful of food.

“Looks good,” Felicity said, picking at the top of her bread without eating.

“What’s wrong with you?” He asked around mouthfuls of sandwich.

“What do you think?” She asked morosely, popping a pickle slice in her mouth and crunching it loudly.

“What did Bruce do this time?” He asked with a sigh as he put down his sandwich, wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, and folded his arms on the top of the table.

“You don’t want to hear it,” she said, picking at her crust with her fingernails.

He rolled his eyes at her, “Just tell me. As long as you keep the naked details to a minimum I’m cool. What did Bruce do?”

“Lots of stuff,” she said with a pout.

“Give me the highlights,” he told her as he picked up his sandwich and began chewing again.

“Are you sure?” She asked again.

“Shoot,” he said, his mouth full.

“Okay, well, for one thing he asked me to marry him,” She said with a sigh as she continued to stare down at her sandwich sadly. “And to make matters worse he offered to retire the cowl so we could have kids; kids! He even named them, can you believe it? Betsy and Thomas…I’m still not sure about the whole ‘Betsy’ thing but…” she looked up as she heard the sound of half of the contents of Tim’s sandwich slide out from between the slices of bread and fall onto his plate with a mayonnaise lubricated plop. “Are you okay?”

“Uh…” He put down his sandwich and blinked. “I think so. Maybe.” He gestured towards her in confusion, “Did you just say that Bruce asked you to marry him and named your kids; as in kids that are both his and yours together?”

“That’s crazy, isn’t it?” She asked, wrinkling her nose.

“No, no, not at all,” Tim said shaking his head and speaking in a higher than normal pitch. “Um, by the way, on a totally unrelated subject; Bruce wasn’t bleeding from a recent blow to the head or anything, was he?”

Felicity sighed, “Yeah, no. No head wound.”

“That’s good,” Tim nodded. “Okay, wow; guess that’s good news then, huh? So what’s the problem?”

“What’s the problem?” Felicity repeated slowly. “I don’t know, Tim; what do you think the problem
could be?"

“I don’t know,” he answered with honest confusion. “He asked you to marry him, named your imaginary kids; don’t all chicks dig that kind of romantic stuff? As far as I know that’s the kind of ‘happily ever after’ you girls dream of.”

“First off, hanging around with a group of confirmed bachelors has truly warped your sense of what women want. So no FYI; no, it’s not the kind of romantic stuff ‘us girls’ dream of,” she said giving him a nasty look. “Chicks don’t ‘dig it’ when a guy basically tells you that you have no choice but to marry them right before they order you to obey them. While I have no doubt that Bruce *thinks* he loves me, the fact is that he doesn’t respect me and what happened this morning proved it,” she said with an indignant huff.

“Well, I’m going to have to call bullshit on that one,” he snorted.

“Tim, he doesn’t trust me and he won’t accept the fact that I’m not the same person I was four years ago! He refuses to listen to anything I say and thinks he can just steamroll over me and force me to do whatever he tells me to!”

“Again; that’s crap,” he told her point blank. “You’re probably the only person other than Alfred that he does trust. He asked you to marry him; he named your kids.” He said in amazement. “Yeah, he’s an ass, but how does that translate to him not respecting you?”

“When I told him I had been running my own op with Stellmoor he refused to listen to me! I tried to tell him that—”

“Back up,” he told him, all good humor leaving his expression. “Repeat that last part again and go really slow with it this time.”

“I decided to go into Stellmoor’s op and check things out for myself,” she told him.

“When?” He asked harshly.

“Last week.”

“This is that Orbital Organization thing you and Sara were talking about last night,” he said, not waiting for her to confirm it. “Son of a—I knew the minute you said ‘charity’ that something was up. Does Luke know?”

“Are you kidding?” She said with a note of derision. “He’s worse than Bruce, believe it or not.”

“And Sara; she’s running this with you?” He asked.

“Obviously,” she told him. “Who else would I go to? She’s already on the inside and I trust her.”

His jaw clenched and he ran his hand over his mouth in agitation, “No.”

“No?” She asked, taken aback by his tone.

“No,” he said firmly. “You’re not doing this.”

“I’m not doing this?” She repeated.

“No, you aren’t. You aren’t going anywhere near that place again, understood?” He said harshly. Felicity blinked at him, “What’s your blood type, Tim?”
“What?” He scowled in confusion.

“Your blood type?” She repeated.

“A positive, why?” He asked her dubiously.

“Bruce is AB positive,” she muttered under her breath. “Do you know your parents’ blood types? Your mom wasn’t O positive, was she?”

“Bruce isn’t my biological dad,” he told her flatly.

“Are you sure? Because it’s your face but his words keep coming out of it,” she said sarcastically.

“Maybe that’s because he’s right,” he tossed back then winced, “Crap, I hate that I just said that out loud.”

“I’m the target, Tim. Stellmoor came to me for a reason,” she told him.

“Exactly, which means you need to stay as far away from them as possible,” he told her. “And you definitely shouldn’t be running ops all by yourself with no back up!”

“I have back up,” she told him.

“Sara?” He said in derision.

“Yeah, Sara,” Felicity scowled. “You have a problem with that?”

“A problem with you going on an op with only a former member of the League as backup who happens to already work for the people you’re trying to investigate? Why would I?” He asked her acerbically.

“I trust Sara,” she told him angrily.

He glared at her, “Fine, you trust her; that’s good enough for me.”

“So glad you approve,” she snapped back.

“So, was she the one backing you up when you went in last week? Because, as far as I know, she only got into town yesterday.”

Now it was her turn to cringe. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair, “Okay, so…maybe I shouldn’t have jumped the gun and gone in without back up the first time.”

“You think?” He asked facetiously.

She narrowed her eyes at him, “The point is nothing happened, and if we’re going to figure out what’s going on then I need to go in and see what’s happening for myself.”

“No, no way,” he said stubbornly.

“I wasn’t asking for permission, Tim. Whether you or Bruce like it or not, I’m doing this.”

His lips thinned in aggravation, “You’re not a field operator, Felicity.”

“Again with Bruce’s voice coming out of your mouth,” she burst out. “Seriously, have you ever considered getting a DNA test?”
“I’m already in the will, what difference would it make?” He returned.

“I have field experience,” she told him.

“Not enough,” he said stubbornly.

“How do you know? You were, what, barely in your teens when you became Robin? How old were you when you took your first bullet; sixteen, seventeen?” She asked him. “You don’t know what I can do or what I have been doing for the last four years. For your information I took down two armed thugs by myself after I left the club last night.”

“What?” Tim said in a near shout. “When—what—where the hell did this happen?”

“I was walking around the East End near the MoMA heading for the Wayne Foundation—”

“What the hell were you doing walking around the East End by yourself in the middle of the night?” He demanded. She reached over suddenly and plucked a few hairs from his scalp causing him to yelp in pain before rubbing his head, “What the hell was that for?”

She wound the hairs into a ball and stuck them in her pocket, “For my own peace of mind.”

He gave her a nasty look, “Sara told Tam you caught a cab back to your dad’s place. You said you were going straight home otherwise I wouldn’t have let you leave the club by yourself!”

“Well, you already knew I was with Bruce last night; or did you forget about your girlfriend screaming ‘booty call’ this morning?” She asked him blithely. “What? Did you think Bruce and I were having a slumber party at my Dad’s place?”

He scowled muttering, “I was trying to forget about that, thank you.” He made a disgruntled sound, “So that’s how you and Bruce hooked up last night? He saved you from some muggers?”

“Why would Bruce have to—!” She closed her eyes and did a slow count, “No. Were you not paying attention when I told you that *I* took down the muggers *by myself*?”

“Seriously?” Tim asked questioningly.

She narrowed her eyes, “Yes; seriously. In fact, Bruce was kind of put out by the fact that he had to call an ambulance for them.”

“An ambulance,” he repeated.

“Well, they pretty much needed it after I stabbed the first guy with his own knife then broke the other punk’s hand when I took away his gun, not to mention the fact that they both had broken noses and various other cuts and bruises. He was worried that the cops would charge me with felony assault once they got there because the guy with the knife in his lower back was screaming that they were the victims while I didn’t have a mark on me,” she said with an edge of sarcasm.

Tim blinked in surprise, “You…did that?”

“Yes, I did that,” she said disgustedly. “Call Barbara if you don’t believe me.” She shook her head and made to get up from the table, “Look, thanks for the sandwich but—”

“Hey,” he said quickly latching on to her arm to stop her. “Look, don’t—don’t go, okay?” He asked, his expression contrite, “I’m sorry, just, please, talk to me.”

“Fine,” she grumbled, sitting back down reluctantly.
“You said the two guys were armed?” He asked her once she settled back into her chair.

“A knife and a gun, yeah,” she supplied.

He nodded slowly although his eyes were bugging out slightly, “And you took them out?” He asked. “How?”

“It wasn’t that hard,” she shrugged. “The first guy did a clumsy lunge and tried to snatch my purse so I kicked him in the ribs and sent him bouncing off the wall. When the guy holding the knife came at me I went into a cross block and held maneuver and used his momentum against him so he stabbed himself in the back then I used the same maneuver when the other punk got up and took out his gun. I wound up breaking his finger pretty badly. Bruce showed up just as he took a runner and clocked him then kicked the other one in the face right before he called the cops.” She smirked, “I think half the reason he was so pissed is because I stole his thunder. The guy with the knife in his back was trying to get him to save them from me.”

“Seriously?” He said chuckling. “Oh man, I wish I had been there. He was holding it ‘gangsta style’ wasn’t he?” He asked. When she nodded he chuckled again, “Amateurs. I just love it when they do that shit. And Bruce was totally pissed?”

“He was not happy,” she admitted.

“Classic,” he sighed. “Gotta love the East End on a Saturday night. Okay, so you can trounce a couple of wanna-be thugs; I believe you and, yes, you do have skills. Still, it doesn’t make you a field operator.” At her raised eyebrow he frowned, “I guess Bruce said that, too, huh? Crap,” he pulled a face. “As much as I’m loathe to admit it though, he’s not wrong. I mean, like I said, I don’t doubt that you have skills; Tam has skills, but it doesn’t mean that you won’t get hurt if you go in blind like this.”

“So what?” She asked him. “If I get hurt or killed whose business is it but mine?”

“So what?” He sputtered with no small amount of outrage. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? Of course it’s our business!”

“Why? I’m not asking you or Bruce to help me; I’m running this on my own. Tim, believe it or not, I’ve faced a lot worse than a bunch of tech-nerds in a Cyber-ops control room and I did it pretty much by myself,” she told him. “The only danger I faced when I was there was the fact that they were using real cream in the coffee and I’m pretty sure my cholesterol can withstand the hit.”

“Yeah, but you had no way of knowing that at the time,” he said insistently.

“And I admitted that it was a bonehead move, but it had to be done,” she told him without apology. “Just like I know what needs to be done now.”

“Fine,” he said at last. “If this is what has to happen then I’m staying in Gotham to help.”

“You can’t,” she told him.

“Are you going to let Bruce in?” He asked her.

“No! Bruce isn’t going to follow my lead and you know that,” she said in exasperation. “He’d just try to push me aside and rush in because he thinks I can’t take care of myself.”

“Then I’m staying,” he told her. “Luke can handle Starling. He’s just got to train this Roy guy, right? He can do that with one arm and I can take his place when he goes back to Africa once this is
settled.”

“It won’t work,” Felicity told him. “The reason you’re being sent in is because you’re Bruce’s son. That’s the whole point, remember? It makes more sense to have you there overseeing the project at QC than it would to send in Luke.”

“Luke is a MIT grad, an engineer, and the son of Wayne Enterprises’ CEO,” he argued. “He can handle it.”

“Luke is supposedly a schoolteacher and a charity-aid worker, you’re a voting member of the board and in line to one day control 70% of the company’s common stock along with Dick,” she told him. “Big difference.”

“Yeah, like I ever go to those things,” he snorted. “I’m a board member in name only. Bruce has our proxy and does all the voting on our behalf. I’m hardly ever there and Dick has no intentions of ever joining Wayne Enterprises. He’s got his own investments thanks to your dad managing his portfolio for him. Besides the high end apartment complex in Bludhaven, he’s got a bunch of other investment properties, the circus, and he got in on the ground floor of some software start-ups Lucius steered him towards. He’s nowhere near Bruce’s level but he’s still pretty much set for life.”

“Which is why he isn’t sending in Dick,” she pointed out reasonably. “Whether you’re there full-time or not, you actually do work for Wayne Enterprises and you’re the one who’s going to take over for Bruce eventually. He knows it, you know it and, more importantly, everyone else in the company knows it which is all the more reason for you to be in Starling,” she told him. “And even if she thinks you’re just a figurehead, Isabel knows enough about Bruce to know that he keeps a tight rein on who he lets have voting shares in his companies and, as his heir, that gives you a whole lot of power.”

“How do you figure?” He asked her. “Luke has stock in Wayne.”

“It’s not the same,” she said wryly. “Isabel knows that Wayne Enterprises’ common stock is completely held in private hands and it wouldn’t be hard for her to figure out who owns what. Bruce has 51% in his name, 19% is split between you and Dick, and my dad, Miss Wells, and Alfred own the other 30% some of which is held by my dad for me, Tam, and Luke in a blind trust; emphasis on blind, meaning that we can’t touch our stock or make any decisions regarding our investments without approval from Lucius. He set it up that way so we could all get jobs wherever we wanted to without having to worry about legalities like conflict of interest. None of us can touch our trusts until we’re thirty-five or he dies, whichever comes first, and then we have the option of breaking the trust or appointing another fiduciary.”

“How do you know this stuff,” he said shaking his head. “Seriously, you should be the one taking over for Bruce and Lucius eventually, not me.”

“It’s not that hard, Tim. My shares might be locked up in a trust but I still read the stockholder’s reports on the sly,” she said rolling her eyes. “You should try it some time. The point is that you being there makes sense. Of course, it doesn’t matter anyway because they already know all about Bruce being the Batman so they probably know about you too.”

“Whoa, hold up,” he said quickly. “When did this happen?”

“Didn’t I mention that part?” She said with a quirk as she backtracked through her recent conversations revolving around that particular subject.

“No, no you didn’t,” Tim said with a grimace. “Does Bruce know?”
“Yep,” she confirmed. “He still wasn’t going for it though.”

“Fuck-a-duck.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose wearily, “Now I really, *really* don’t like the idea of you doing this. Look, I’m staying and that’s final. If you’re going back in then I’m going with you because that’s the only way I can see this playing out.”

“As what? My secretary?” She asked him.

“I prefer executive assistant,” he shot back with a hint of cheek.

She rolled her eyes at him, “Tim, what is it that you think you can accomplish by staying here?”

“I can be your back up!” He scowled in frustration, “I might not be able to walk through the front door but I can run coms, work the perimeter, come after you if the tangy butt nuggets hit the fan, the usual vigilante hero shit, what else?”

Felicity grinned, “Nice turn of phrase but here’s the problem: The building is shielded from outside coms except the ones coming from their servers, the perimeter is guarded by rooftop snipers and ground forces, and they’ve got cameras, laser sensors, razor wire, electrified fencing, plus state of the art biometric locks and safeguards.”

His face fell, “Seriously?”

“Yep,” she nodded.

“The fuck?” He burst out. “Where are they holed up; Fort Knox?”

“My point exactly,” she told him. “Look, I can get in no problem. In fact, they want me to run the joint so I have full access. If I come in with you then all hell is going to break loose. I can handle this on my own, trust me. Just let me run recon and you go handle your end in Starling with Oliver then, if everything checks out, I can invite you in for a cup of coffee and you can check it out for yourself.”

“A cup of coffee?” He said slowly. “That’s different; I don’t think I’ve ever been invited inside a villainous lair for coffee before.” He paused, “Well, Hatter invited me inside his place for tea once but his shit tends to be heavily spiked with hallucinogenics so I never took him up on it. Plus it’s that nasty Celestial Seasonings crap that tastes like dryer sheets and potpourri. Anybody who thinks that’s what tea is supposed to taste like is just wrong in the head; Sleepytime and Orange Zinger my ass.”

“I don’t know if it’s a villainous lair or not; that’s the point,” Felicity said with a snort. “I mean, there’s a vibe that’s pinging my radar hard, yeah, but they already said I could invite Bruce if I wanted to as long as he didn’t try to piddle on the carpets. Once my ping is satisfied and I decide for myself that they’re legit I really don’t think they’d mind if I brought you in. In fact, they’ll probably try to recruit you which, if they are the good guys, would mean we could work together again. Plus, the coffee is really, really good there,” she said with all the sincerity her inner caffeine-fiend could muster. “They grind their own beans, Tim; and did I mention the cream?”

“I still don’t like this,” he said stubbornly. “It’s just…it’s too dangerous.”

“It’s an impressive setup and I’m not saying I buy it yet, but if they were going to hurt me they could have done so last week instead of treating me to a cup of freshly ground yumminess and conversation after giving me the full tour. I’m handling it, Tim. I’ll be fine and, if not, like I said before, it’s my life and my call. You can come to my funeral and yell at my pretty corpse if I’m wrong.”
He scowled, “I really wish you’d quit saying that. Every time you say ‘it’s my life’ and then talk about dying, my ass starts to itch!” He rubbed his hand over his eyes and made a noise of frustration, “Goddamn it,” he grumbled, “Luke is going to kick my ass if anything happens to you, you realize that right? Not to mention what Bruce will do to me.”

“I’ve got this, Tim,” she repeated for the umpteenth time. “Why the rest of you can’t see that, I don’t know.”

“Look, it’s not…it’s not that we don’t think you can’t handle it,” he told her, “it’s just that it’s you and we don’t think of you that way.”

She blinked at him, “It’s ‘me’? Uh, okay.”

“Look, don’t…” He sighed and rubbed his hands on his thighs in agitation, “Okay; how long have we known each other?”

She frowned, “What do you mean; like altogether?”

“Yeah, how long?”

She thought about it, “I don’t know; since elementary school? Maybe longer. Since before Bruce adopted you for sure because your mom was on the Foundation committee and we all went to Brentwood until Luke and I left for MIT plus you and he were constantly hanging out together even before you started lusting after Tam.”

“No,” he told her. “We’ve known of each other for that long, but we’ve only known each other five and a half years. This is going to sound weird, but here it goes. Just—just bear with me,” he took a centering breath. “Okay, if you asked me how long I’ve known Tam and Luke then you would be right and I would say ‘forever’. Even before I came to live with Bruce, my parents and Lucius ran in the same social circle. I’ve been friends with Luke since kindergarten and, the minute my hormones kicked in, yup, I noticed Tam. The thing is, I should have noticed you but I didn’t; not until Bruce brought you into the cave. Until then I knew of you—sort of--but for the life of me, I probably couldn’t pick you out in a crowd and if anyone asked me what your name was my best answer would be ‘Baby’ because that’s all I could remember Luke and Tam ever calling you. Still, point is, you and I never hung out before then and we definitely weren’t friends.”

Felicity tried to ignore the small prick of hurt she felt from his words and shrugged it off, “Yeah, well, that’s not the first time I’ve heard that. I didn’t exactly run in the same social circles as Tam and Luke; what’s your point?”

“Don’t get upset,” he told her, looking pained.

“I’m not upset,” she said, only lying a little bit.

“Yes, you are; I may not have been your friend then, but I am now, and I know you well enough to know when you’re upset. I didn’t tell you that to hurt your feelings, I told you that because I *should have* noticed you; you and I should have been friends long before I even met Tam and Luke,” he told her, his voice laden with sincerity and sympathy. “Tam is a couple of years older than me and, even though I’ve had a thing for her since I was thirteen, she didn’t notice me until she came home that first summer from college. Luke though, I hung out with him constantly. Well, more than I hung out with anyone else, anyway. I wasn’t exactly a social butterfly either, remember? Bruce kept us pretty busy in the cave but when I could hang, he was my partner in crime. If I wasn’t in school, on patrol, or in the cave, I was with Luke, and yet we never spoke. I can’t remember ever having a single conversation with you until Bruce brought you downstairs and that makes absolutely no sense
whateverssoever if you stop to think about it. Even though you were kind of shy and spent most of your
time with your dad at Wayne Enterprises or at home, you and I, we’re the same age. I saw you
around, we went to school together, you’d come over with your dad or I’d see you when I’d be with
Bruce in his office, and we’re both computer geeks. You’d think your dad or Bruce would have
encouraged us to hang out because I have a hell of a lot more in common with you than I do with
Tam yet we never got together; why?”

“I don’t know; maybe because that would be gross and unnatural?” She said giving him a look of
disgust.

“Yeah, I agree,” he told her. “And yet, even though I’m technically older than you by like five days,
the idea of you marrying Bruce and basically becoming my stepmother doesn’t bother me in the
slightest, know why?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me,” she said with a sigh.

“Because even though you might not have been on my radar, you were always important to Bruce,”
he told her. “For the rest of us, Bruce was always the center of the universe. He was always this stoic
guy, always on point, always driven by the mission, a hero. He was what we revolved around, but
you; you were what he revolved around.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” she said quietly.

“It is totally true,” he told her. “You’re the only person he ever smiled for. Not the polite bullshit
smile he flashes for the cameras, but a real genuine smile. Other than the ones he had busting their
asses in the Batcave, he avoided kids like the plague, but he always made time for you and not
because of Lucius. In fact, I can’t even remember him having a single conversation with Luke before
he joined up and he barely noticed Tam until she started working for Wayne Enterprises, but he
always took time out for you.”

He scratched the back of his head sheepishly, “I should probably be a little creeped out about the fact
that he’s been like that with you since you were a little kid but I’m not because it wasn’t like that. He
was never inappropriate or anything, at least I don’t think so, not until you came downstairs and
started working in the cave and then, pow! It’s like a switch got flipped and he started seeing you in
a whole other way. Seeing how he was around you then…” he shook his head, “it made us see him
as human for the first time. It’s weird but it’s like you and Bruce were meant to be and when he read
you in, the rest of us saw that instantly. You walked in the cave and it’s like we saw you for the first
time because we finally saw what Bruce saw. I mean, we knew you were there but, until that
moment, it didn’t register with us just how important you were. Bruce saw it though; he always saw
it. You were always right there in front of him and once we saw that, everything came together for
the rest of us.”

“I didn’t do much,” she said in quiet confusion. “I just helped with Watchtower a little.”

“You did more than you know,” he told her. “Things in the Batcave could get pretty grim, especially
after Jason and Stephanie…” he let his voice trail off. “The thing is, you made Bruce better and that
made the rest of us better. One minute you were Luke and Tam’s shy little sister none of us knew
much about and then one day you showed up out of the blue and we couldn’t ever remember a time
when you weren’t there. You just appeared out of nowhere and all of us felt this overwhelming need
to protect you because of how Bruce acted when he was around you. Not—not that Bruce was the
one you needed protecting from,” he said quickly. “I know I keep making him sound like a character
straight out of a Nabokov novel or something, but that’s not what I’m saying at all.”

“And I appreciate that,” she said drily. “I never really thought of myself as the Lolita type.”
“Of course, technically, he is old enough to be your dad, so at first this whole thing between you was pretty confusing to the rest of us,” he told her.

“Only if he got started in high school,” she told him with a scowl. “A seventeen year age gap isn’t that bad, you know. I mean, it’s a lot but my mom was barely twenty when she met Lucius and he was already in his forties. Bruce’s parents had an even bigger age gap than he and I do; his dad was almost forty and his mom was barely eighteen when he was born.”

“Whatever, I happen to dig older women myself so no judgments,” he said holding up his hands in a gesture of capitulation. “I’m just saying that when you were around he was happier for some reason and, at first, we thought maybe it was because he thought of you like his kid but that wasn’t it. Remember when I pointed out that you and I should have been pushed together by fate or whatever?”

She scrunched up her nose again, “I’ve been trying to scrub it from my memory banks unsuccessfully, so yeah.”

“Bruce really didn’t like me hanging out with Stephanie back when we were in prep. It’s not that he didn’t like her; it’s that she came with a lot of complications attached. You’d think he would have jumped at the chance to push us together as a healthy alternative but he didn’t. In fact, even though I was with Tam by the time you were read in, I remember seeing him tense up a little whenever he caught us hanging out like he was afraid I was…you know,” he smirked. “And it wasn’t just me; he was that way with you and Dick after he and Barb started having problems. Every time Dick would laugh at something you said or touch your shoulder, Bruce would freeze and find somewhere else for him to be. I still remember when you asked Dick about training you to do stuff and the look on Bruce’s face when he found out about it. Dick approached him and asked if he thought you’d be a good candidate to take Cassie’s spot on the team and he just turned on him. He was…” he sighed, “more than livid; he was terrified. It was like even the idea of you getting hurt could end his whole world. He forbade any of us from even discussing it with you from then on out. I could tell that Dick wanted to go toe to toe with him but then he caught the look on his face and dropped it without saying another word. I think that’s what brought it home for the rest of us. In that moment, Bruce showed us exactly how important you were to him. With the rest of us, even though deep down he loved us…even if he couldn’t say it,” he shrugged, “he let us take those risks every day. You though? No way. He didn’t have to say it out loud for us to know that, no matter what else happened, keeping you safe would always come first and that the best way for us to protect him would be to protect you.”

“Look, I already know that Bruce cares about me and that he’s a territorial butthead,” she said, looking away. “That’s not the point.”

“It’s not just Bruce who cares about you,” he told her. “All of us care about you and you’ve always brought out our most protective instincts for some reason. I don’t know why, but you do. Yeah, it has a lot to do with how Bruce is with you but that’s not all of it. It was like the rest of us were lost in the dark from spending so much time in the cave then, one day, you showed up and brought the sunlight in. I remember hearing Bruce laughing in the Batcave at something you said and all of us just froze. I’d never heard him laugh before and you made that happen—in the cave!” He exclaimed in wide-eyed emphasis. “Things started getting better for all of us when you were around. Everyone felt it but Bruce most of all. When you left,” he took a shuddering breath, “It nearly killed him. He was pretty bad off when Jason and Stephanie died and when Cassie left; when Damian died he was out of control, but with you?” He shook his head, “I can’t even imagine how bad it would get if anything ever happened to you. *If* he even survived it, I think he wouldn’t be able to stop until he tore the entire world apart with his bare hands.”
“You say that now but it took him four years to come after me, Tim,” she pointed out. “I didn’t leave, he rejected me. He told me he didn’t want me, not the other way around.”

“Yeah, and you didn’t see him for those four years so you don’t know how bad it got, I do,” he said seriously. “Remember the Army of Blood thing?”

“Kind of hard to forget it,” Felicity said ruefully.

“The reason it took us so long to get the story about what was happening down there is because we were all dealing with Talia and Ra’s. Damian was dead, Bruce was a wreck, but the minute he heard me and Dick telling the pilot to head your way he shook all of it off and was on full alert; the pain left his face. For those brief few minutes before Tam was able to tell us it was over, he came alive again; for you. When he found out that you were okay and that the danger had passed, the mask slipped back into place. According to Barb it was like that the night he met Huntress. The second he found out you were in danger he was ready to hop a jet and drag you back home. That alone should tell you something.”

“So what? Sorry to sound callous but what am I supposed to do? I can’t wrap myself in cotton wool for the rest of my life to make him feel better; I’m sorry, I just can’t,” she said in frustration. “I can’t give up my independence just because he wants me to be less than what I am.”

“No, you can’t. I’m not telling you to play the weak kneed damsel in distress, but you can and should at least give the guy a break,” he told her. “He knows you’re good and, if it was anyone else but you, he’d probably be okay with you running this op, but it is you, Baby. As long as it’s you in the line of fire he isn’t going to want to give in. Try to convince him, give him another chance and see what happens. Give him a chance to see things your way before you write him off completely.”

“I’m not backing down,” she told him stubbornly. “I’m seeing this through to the end.”

“Are you sure Sara has your back?” He asked, his resolve visibly weakening.

“I’m sure,” she told him. “She’s heading out to Starling for a day or two and then she’s coming back on Wednesday to help me with the Stellmoor thing.”

“Fine,” he said. “But you have to promise me that you won’t do anything until then,” he told her. “Give Bruce until Wednesday to cave.”

“He’s not going to cave,” she snorted.

“Probably not,” he agreed. “Just promise me anyway that you won’t go in without back up.”

“I promise I won’t go in without back up,” she said, although she didn’t specify what kind of back up or who would be the one to provide it.

Luckily he didn’t seem to notice. “Good, okay, that’s one thing out of the way,” he said, breathing a sigh of relief.

They sat in silence for a few minutes before she finally got up the courage to bring up the next subject weighing on her mind.

“He told me about Damian and Talia,” Felicity said quietly and as he looked at her sharply she added, “Last night; he told me about what happened.”

“What else did he tell you?” He asked guardedly.
“All of it, I think,” she told him. “He told me about Damian, that he apparently tried to poison me once and that he tried to kill you on numerous occasions as well.”

“Damian went after you?” He asked sharply then scowled. “Doesn’t surprise me. That little psycho shit probably tried to kill all of us at least once with the exception of Bruce and Dick. I’m just surprised Bruce let him get close enough to you to try something.”

“He didn’t; that’s why Damian never gave me the poison,” she told him. “Bruce stopped him before it ever got that far. He didn’t tell you about it?”

“No,” Tim said menacingly. “If Bruce had told me it wouldn’t have gone well for Damian and he knows it. He tried talking some shit about you once and let’s just say the little punk learned to keep his mouth shut around me after that.”

“He talked about me?” Felicity said in surprise. “I only met him once! What did he say?”

Tim shook his head with an air of disgust, “You don’t want to know.”

“No, I kind of do,” she told him.

Tim shifted uncomfortably on the chair, “First off, it wasn’t about you; it was about me. He started taunting me by accusing me of being ‘less than a man’. Not only was the kid a psycho but he was also a homophobe. That stuff doesn’t bother me though; I’m secure enough in who I am not to take shit like that seriously and, even if I was gay, so freakin’ what? I mean, how stupid and pathetic would someone have to be to let that shit get to them anyway?” His lips curled in an expression of disgust, “I’m like, ‘Yeah, okay, enjoy your Tea Party rally then go watch some 700 Club while the rest of us actually get a fucking life.’ He started talking about me wearing a dress and being the next Batgirl but I laughed it off. I told him he was an idiot and, until his testicles finished descending, he should just shut the hell up about things he didn’t even understand yet. I mean, shit, the kid was ten years old. I didn’t react the way he wanted me to until…” His voice trailed off.

“Until?” She prompted.

“It’s just…” he made a disgusted sound in his throat. “He started talking crazy shit about how I was so pathetic that I couldn’t even worm my way into the bed of a whore like—” He glanced up at her guiltily. “He said that fate had placed him there as Enkidu, whatever the hell that meant, and that he had rid Bruce of the ‘spawn of the divine whore’ and now he would rid him of his ‘false child’ as well by slitting my throat like a sacrificial bull and that he’d burn my ‘ill-formed testicles’ at the altar of the gods and throw my ‘insignificant manhood’ in your face when his mother made her triumphant return.”

“He called my mom a whore?” Felicity asked, feeling genuinely hurt despite knowing that the boy was obviously mentally ill.

“Look, the kid was looney-tunes, okay,” Tim told her with a snort. “Really, had I been thinking more clearly I would have laughed it off but I was just so sick of his shit, you know? I just…I really wanted to beat the crap out of that kid so I did. I pummeled the living shit out of him until he literally pissed himself and it felt *really*, *really* good.” He chuckled ruefully, “Do yourself a favor and forget about the rest of that crap; he didn’t know you or your family and it wasn’t about you as much as it was about me and the crazy shit Talia had been teaching him. That kid was a lost cause from day one if you ask me. Bruce should have just put him in Arkham the minute he showed up on his doorstep.”

“But Bruce said that Damian redeemed himself in the end; that he died a hero,” she told him. “He
said that, in the end, he was finally getting through to him.”

Tim’s eyes darkened, “Bruce is wrong. Oh, Damian saved Dick all right. Dick was down for the count and the Heretic was coming in for the kill when Damian jumped in front of his sword, but he didn’t redeem shit.”

Felicity frowned in confusion, “What do you mean? If he did like you said and saved Dick…?”

Tim shook his head, “He didn’t care about saving Dick,” he snorted. “The little fucker was a killer and that’s what drove him to attack the Heretic. Plus, he was the target to begin with; Dick just got in the way. If he had any kind of genuine feelings towards Dick it was because he was wearing the cowl at one point while Bruce…um, took some time off,” he said, shooting her a strange look then continued. “Dick and Bruce thought he was getting better because they wanted to think that. It’s kind of like when people convince themselves that the tiger they’re keeping on a leash loves them when, the truth is, they just haven’t gotten around to having them for dinner yet.”

“Wait, go back,” she narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously, “What does that mean; ‘Bruce took some time off’? When? Why? Did he have surgery or something? Why didn’t anyone call me?”

“It’s a long story,” he muttered. “The point is that Bruce didn’t see what I saw. If Damian was changing it only meant he was getting more dangerous, not less.”

“How so?” She asked, dropping the other thing for the time being.

“What I mean is that he wasn’t killing for the sake of killing anymore, sure, but he was still a deadly little psycho fuck; Bruce and Dick just changed his focus. After they worked on him a while, instead of killing anything that annoyed him, he directed his rage towards anyone he thought was his father’s enemy. It was like a jihad kind of thing. Did Bruce tell you what Damian did to the Joker?”

“No,” she said quietly.

“He tied him to a chair and nearly beat him to death just for the hell of it,” he said without emotion. “He heard about what the Joker did to Jason and he figured it was a case of let the punishment fit the crime. He even used the same tire iron. If he hadn’t gotten cocky and the Joker hadn’t managed to get him with some toxin, he might have killed him.”

Try as she might, she couldn’t really feel a whole lot of outrage over that. “I’m sorry, I get what you’re saying but when it comes to Joker…” she sighed. “I know how Bruce is about using lethal force but some people need to die in order to save lives.” She saw the surprise in Tim’s eyes as the words left her mouth but she didn’t give him a chance to object.

For better or worse, she had changed and they needed to start realizing that.

She gave him a hard look, a look she had acquired six months ago. It was the look of someone who knew what it was like to have blood on her hands but who had paid that price for the greater good. She may have never served in the military but she was a soldier now and she dropped her shields just enough to allow Tim to finally see that. “As far as I’m concerned, the Joker’s one of them. Granted, it should be after the courts render their decision and in a humane setting, but I certainly wouldn’t shed a tear if someone clubbed him to death with a tire iron or just put a bullet in his brain. No offense, but Bruce or someone else should have put him down ages ago. I get that all life is sacred but at what point do you draw the line? How many people died because of Joker? Sometimes mercy does more harm than good.”

She knew that better than anyone. She was the one who convinced Oliver to spare Slade’s life when
Sara, Nyssa, Lance, and even Dig encouraged him to pull the trigger. She was the one to lay her life on the line to keep Slade alive, who helped put him in ARGUS’s prison on Lian Yu, and therefore it was her fault when Slade escaped and nearly took out the entire city with the Omega Device. All the people who fell at his feet, his swords having ended their existence; their blood was on her hands just as much as they were on his.

Her mercy, her naïve belief that all life held value, wound up costing lives in the end. That was on her. She still believed that killing wasn’t always the answer; but sometimes pulling the trigger saved more lives than it took.

Tim stared at her, shock etched on his features, then ran his hand over his mouth in agitation, “Maybe…maybe you’re right, I don’t know anymore, but the point is that Damian was so out of control that he managed to scare the shit out of the Joker. The Joker, Felicity. Bruce would have a cow if he heard me say this but, to be honest, if he had killed him, I could give a shit. Then again, I didn’t exactly shed tears over Damian either.” His eyes took on a haunted cast. “A few years ago I never would have thought I would or could ever say that but, knowing what Damian was capable of at ten years old, can you imagine what he would have become as he got older and stronger? If he was that monstrous as a little kid, what would he be like at twenty? Thirty?” He shook his head, “Like I said, I wouldn’t want Bruce to ever hear me say this, but the fact is that Damian’s death was a blessing in disguise. It sounds bad but all I could think when I first saw his body was ‘good’.”

Felicity felt her face suffuse with color as she looked into the face of the man she had thought of as the most well-adjusted and sweetest member of the Bat family and realized that, perhaps the darkness that languished in her own heart had made its way into his as well. This was a side to Tim she’d never seen before, “You don’t mean that, do you?”

“I do,” he said without a hint of emotion. “Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t want him to die like that but I knew that eventually we’d have to take him down, it was just a matter of time. I knew that eventually Damian would become so out of control that Bruce would have no choice but to put him away and that would have destroyed him. At least, this way, his death was quick and nearly painless. It definitely beat spending the rest of his life in Arkham or in solitary at Blackgate Prison.” He rubbed his hand on his chin and leaned forward, elbows on the table as he looked her in the eye, his voice dropping to a near hush as though he was afraid to speak them too loud for fear of being heard even though they were the only two people there, “Ra’s, Talia, Damian, even Nyssa; there’s something twisted up inside of all of them. I don’t even believe in God or an afterlife but that whole bloodline, all of them, it’s like they were born without souls or something. Part of me thinks we should just wipe them all off the face of the earth and be done with this whole thing once and for all. I’m not proud of it but it’s there and I know that Bruce feels the same way... he just can’t bring himself to admit it.”

He was right, that’s exactly how Bruce felt. Whether he knew it or not, he managed to parrot back what Bruce had told her almost word for word. “That doesn’t sound like you, Tim,” she said quietly. “The person I once knew would never have said any of that.”

“I would have said the same thing about you when you said that some people had to die in order to save lives but, you said it yourself, four years is a long time. A lot can change and a lot did,” he told her then leaned back and shut his eyes. “Lately I’ve been asking myself what it would have been like if you stayed and I wondered why Bruce waited so long to go after you. I keep thinking that if you had just stayed and you guys had worked it out, then you and Bruce could have gotten married and had kids of your own by now. He would have been happier and everyone’s life would have changed for the better. I think that and then I remember what Damian was like, and I know exactly why Bruce left you in Starling City,” he told her, his gaze fixed on hers. “Damian would have killed you in a heartbeat, even Bruce said so. If you guys had tried to get married and have kids of your own…”
he closed his eyes. “You were better off back in Starling City. Even now, knowing how much you went through, you were safer where you were, trust me.”

“I don’t know about that but, as hard as it got sometimes, I needed this time away,” she told him. “At times it was...it was bad, more dangerous than you could possibly ever imagine, but I grew up a lot. I’m not a rookie, Tim. I’ve gotten my hands dirty more than once and, if you knew what I had to do, you might even be tempted to call me a monster, too.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, you could never be a monster.”

“Why not?” she asked.

He gave her a sad half-smile, “Because Bruce loves you too much to ever let that happen.”

“It’s too late, I already am one,” she said softly, not even realizing she had spoken out loud until he answered her.

“No, you’re not,” he said adamantly.

She smiled but inside she felt the chill that had been left there by Slade settle deep in her heart, “I wish that was true but what’s done is done and not even Bruce can go back in time to fix it.”

Time took a deep breath and let it out slowly, “What happened six months ago? What is it that you don’t want to talk about?”

Felicity offered him a bitter smile and shrugged, “Let’s just say that I made an error in judgment; I naively thought I was...helping someone I care about do the right thing and other people had to pay the price for my short-sightedness as a result. Six months ago I corrected that mistake but at a cost.”

“What the hell does that mean?” He asked her with a frown.

“It means that I finally learned what it meant to let the darkness in.”
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Four

The next day she found herself with Tam and Sara going through one of her sister’s storage units as she shared with them the details of her latest Bruce adventure.

“And then what happened?” Tam asked, completely enraptured.

“I said ‘watch me’ and I left,” she said as she sorted through the rack of jackets. “Hey Sara, this looks like your kind of thing.”

“Ooh, mine!” Sara said, snatching the black zip trimmed motorcycle jacket from her hand, “Are you sure I can have this?”

Tam looked over at what she was holding and shrugged, “Yeah, I’ve got so many leather jackets it’s ridiculous. Besides, I stole that one out of the wardrobe trailer when we wrapped up filming ‘The Blue Beetle’ last month up in Vancouver.” She shook her head, “If you thought Gotham winters were cold…” She paused and turned to her sister, “You know, I could get a couple of extra tickets to the premier if you guys want to go.”

“No,” Felicity said succinctly causing Sara to snicker.

“Why not?” Tam asked. “It’s a great movie; I got to see the rushes and, I’m telling you, we’re talking Oscar gold. It’s about this guy named Daniel Garret who loses his fiancée tragically in a—”

Sara began to snort behind her jacket as Felicity shot her a dirty look, “Yeah, I’m aware of the plotline, but no thanks.”

“Seriously Baby, it’s a Hollywood premier,” Tam said in a tone meant to tantalize. “We’re talking seats right smack dab between Brangelina and Clooney. Since I’m in charge of all the PR I totally have the hook up! I can even introduce you to Garret if you want.”

“Yeah, Cutie, don’t you want to meet the guy who inspired the movie? I hear he has some brainy blonde bombshell playing his secretary-slash-love interest. The actress even kind of looks a little like you; maybe you’re his type,” Sara said roundly, ducking as Felicity tossed a hanger at her head.

“No.” She said firmly then turned to Tam, “Thanks but no thanks.”
“Okay, you don’t want the tickets then I’ll just give them to somebody else,” Tam said with a
indignant sniff. “I mean, the guy is just a world class athlete who happens to also be a genius
billionaire, an archeologist, single, runs his own tech and pharmaceutical companies, and looks like
Ryan Gosling, but fine.”

“Let’s just say I’m not that big a fan of the genre or the subject matter,” Felicity said darkly.

“Since when?”

“Since she became a magnet for brooding men in masks who all have tragic pasts and their heads up
their asses,” Sara said, tongue in cheek. She held up the jacket again, “So they just let you have
this?” Sara asked, impressed.

“You didn’t just catch the part where she said she stole it?” Felicity asked.

“That’s just a figure of speech,” Tam said dismissively. “Besides, if I didn’t take it then someone else
would have.”

“Seriously though, if I was going to buy this in the store how much would it cost?” Sara asked.

Tam wrinkled her nose and thought about it, “Saint Laurent, right?”

Sara checked the label, “Yeah.”

“Eh, I don’t know?” She said, thumbing through the racks, “Five, maybe?”

“Five hundred dollars? Really?” Sara goggled, looking at the jacket again.

“Five thousand,” Tam corrected her then looked at it again, “More or less.”

“Are you shitting me?” Sara burst out. She stared at Tam, her jaw hanging open, “I paid less than
that for my first car and you just stole this?”

“I didn’t actually steal it,” Tam said again. “Besides, it only costs that much if you were to buy it in
the store. Half the time the designers just give us the clothes for free as advertising or they come from
one of our in-house costumers.”

“They just gave you a five thousand dollar jacket for free?” Sara asked skeptically.

“How do you think I got all these clothes?” Tam said off-handedly. “I told you I’m cheap and I hate
to shop. In my humble opinion, retail should be outlawed altogether.”

“That’s true,” Felicity said wryly. “Stealing, on the other hand, should be legalized along with
breaking and entering.”

“I couldn’t find my key, okay,” Tam told her. “Besides, it’s still my storage unit; it’s only breaking
and entering if it’s someone else’s unit.”

“Well, you’re buying me a new set of picks,” Felicity told her then groused, “I can’t believe you
broke my half-diamond *and* the torsion wrench.”

“Invest in a better set and that wouldn’t happen,” Tam told her with an air of superiority. “I’ll just
give you one of Tim’s spare sets in exchange, alright? Happy now?”

“Fine,” she grumbled. “You still owe me an apology though.”
“I’m sorry I broke your obviously inferior quality lock picks,” Tam told her.

“Thank you, even though the qualifier was a bit uncalled for.”

“One of these days you need to tell me how both of you learned to pick locks like that,” Sara told her before looking at the jacket again. “Meanwhile, I am definitely in the wrong business,” Sara muttered as she hung the jacket on her quickly growing ‘keep’ rack.

“It pays the bills,” Tam said tossing a garment bag towards Felicity. “Here.”

“What is it?” She unzipped the bag and looked at the sequined silk and satin pantsuit. “Why are you giving me this?”

“It’ll look cute on you,” she said.

“What is with you and trying to dress me like I’m about to pull a rabbit out of a top hat?” Felicity asked her.

“It’s Akris and it’s sexy; trust me. If you’re going to drive Bruce insane then you need to up your game,” Tam told her. “I was right about the dress the other night, wasn’t I?”

“That’s not really the best example to use right now,” Felicity said slowly.

“He actually told you he loved you and wanted to marry you so you could make babies together?” Sara asked her. “Picture it: You, Felicity Smoak, as Mrs. Batman walking down the street with a whole litter of mini-Bats in tow. How fucking weird is that?” she said shaking her head and chuckling.

“He even told me what he wanted to name our kids,” she said in a disgruntled tone. “All seven of them.”

“Seven?” Sara said dubiously.

“Bruce told you he wants you to shoot out seven of his evil little Bat-spawn and you didn’t offer him a do-it-yourself vasectomy in exchange?” Tam asked incredulously.

“Well, technically he said we could have anywhere from one up to a dozen if I wanted but he already had seven names picked out right off the top of his head.” She frowned in contemplation, “Betsy; eh, still not sure about that one.”

Sara wrinkled her nose, “It’s not bad, kind of sweet and old-fashioned I guess, but the first time the kid has an accident she’d wind up being stuck with ‘Betsy Wetsy’ forever.”

Felicity shrugged, “Still better than Helena though; that kid would probably come out of the womb with a hate-on for Organized Crime Barbie complete with a black leather diaper and sparkly pink mini-crossbow.”

“What is it with masks and the whole hot and cold thing?” Tam asked in disgust. “You know, seriously; What. The. Hell? I mean, first Bruce is pushing you away and the next thing you know he’s offering to knock you up and stick a ring on it like that solves everything? Please.”

“I know,” Felicity said wearily, “Maybe I should consider joining the Sapphic Sisterhood after all; women have got to be easier than men because, God knows, they certainly can’t be worse.”

“That’s true,” Sara agreed. “I mean, don’t get me wrong; with women you sleep together once, then
the next day you’re signing a lease and buying a dog, but it’s still pretty straight forward. There isn’t this whole element of angst and ‘I don’t know if I can commit’ crap to it. Trying to get a guy to commit is hard; trying to get two women in a lesbian relationship not to commit is practically impossible. I mean, I still like men but, nine times out of ten, women are just so much easier to deal with, trust me.”

“She’s right,” Tam agreed. “With women it’s just random spurts of bitchiness once a month and the occasional Indigo Girls or Ani DiFranco concert,” Tam said distractedly. She tossed another garment bag towards Sara. “Matching leather pants incoming!”

“Cool!” Sara said, unzipping it and looking inside. “Yay! I’ve needed a new set of leathers. Oh, and you need to update your Sapphic playlist; you’ve been out of the dug out for too long. Now it’s Mary Lambert and Icona Pop.”

“Oh I love them! ‘All I need in this life of sin is me and my girlfriend! Me and my girlfriend!’” She sang as she wiggled her butt around the storage space. “How do you feel about corsets?” Tam asked her holding up a black leather corset style bustier with a zip front and a crisscrossing of ribbons on the side that went with the jacket perfectly.


“What the hell kind of movie did that come from?” Felicity looked over as Sara held the corset up to her chest. “When did Wayne Entertainment start producing and distributing leather fetish porn?”

“When didn’t we?” Tam shot back.

“Really?” Sara asked in surprise.

“No,” Tam snorted, “but I would love to see the look on Bruce’s face if we suggested it during the next production meeting. For a supposed playboy he’s actually kind of a prude.”

“Bruce is many things but he’s not a prude,” Felicity told her.

“You’re a prude,” Tam retorted, “of course you’d think the guy you’re schtupping isn’t a prude.”

“He’s not a prude,” Sara said supportively.

“And for the record, neither am I,” Felicity added.

“How do you know?” Tam asked ignoring her sister’s protests.

“Because all masks are sexual deviants, present company included,” she said as she picked out several pairs of artfully frayed and torn pairs of designer jeans and placed them on her rack. “It goes along with the whole adrenaline junkie thing.”

“That’s true. You know, I should go back to being a mask,” Tam said with a contemplative look. She grabbed another leather corset and matching leather pants from the rack nearest her and held it against her body for inspection. “Seriously, I have skills and I would look totally bad-ass fighting crime in this.”

Sara and Felicity both looked at the golden tan leathers she was holding up. The rich honey gold leather and slightly darker cheetah print accents made her skin glow and her tawny eyes seem to glitter dangerously.
“Oh, that’s hot,” Sara breathed in a tone that was almost too appreciative.

“How is it you can wear stuff like that and not look like a part time dominatrix slash animal trainer?” Felicity asked in disbelief.

“It’s all in the attitude,” she said, wiggling her pert behind. “Seriously, should I join the family business and hit the streets of Gotham in this or what?”

“As ‘Foxy Lady’?” Felicity snorted.


Felicity shot her a look. “You’re already sleeping with one of my siblings and now you want to go after the other?” She whispered as Tam wandered over to the full length mirror that was leaning somewhat haphazardly against the wall.

“Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve had a brother/sister combo,” Sara told her unrepentantly. “Did I ever tell you the one about me and the Russian assassins?”

“Yes, and I would really like to avoid hearing it again, thanks,” she told her with a note of disgust. “That’s just icky. I mean, twins? And they…with each other?” She said wrinkling her nose and shuddering slightly.

“What can I say; they liked to do everything together,” Sara shrugged.

“That’s just so wrong,” Felicity muttered.

“That’s it, I’m definitely going back to being a mask,” Tam announced walking back towards them. “I look too good in this outfit not to fight crime. You know, Luke gave me a necklace for my birthday a few years ago that might work as well. He said one of the village elders told him it was some kind of ‘Tantu Totem’, whatever the hell that is. I bet I could wear that and a funky belt and totally accessorize this bitch runway style.”

“That gold animal head thing with the teeth?” Felicity asked scrunching her nose in distaste. “Don’t you think it’s kind of tacky?”

“A little, which is why it’s still sitting at the bottom of my jewelry box; still, it’s all in the attitude, you know? I’ve never had anything to wear it with before which is why I haven’t even tried it on yet, but it would go with the whole wild woman theme,” she said looking at the aforementioned suit again. “Kind of a statement necklace to set the whole thing off. I mean, it’s so ugly and tacky that it kind of circles back; like how those dogs with the pug noses and bug eyes are so ugly they’re cute.”

“And you said it was a totem?” Sara asked curiously. “Isn’t that some kind of religious object?”

“Not this thing, trust me. He probably just picked it up from the bazaar or something,” Felicity said dismissively. “Seriously, you should see that thing. It’s got this primitive dog or wolf head in the middle and is surrounded by stylized gold animal teeth. I don’t even think it’s real; it looks like something Elvis might have worn back in his jumpsuit days. It is so totally polyester and black velvet chic that you can practically smell the 1970’s wafting out of it.”

“Luke’s such a cheapskate I doubt he even bought it to begin with,” Tam snorted. “It’s probably just some piece of junk jewelry he found after he moved into David’s old place but it would look pretty cool with this outfit, don’t you think?” She shrugged, “If I can pull it off maybe people will think I’m wearing it ironically.”
“Yeah, if it doesn’t turn your neck green or give you heavy metal poisoning first,” Felicity rolled her eyes at her. “You seriously want to run along rooftops with Tim as ‘Foxy Lady’ again?”

“Well, I’d change the name, but sure; why not?” She shrugged. “Back when Luke and I first began studying martial arts I could kick his ass and now he’s Batwing. Why can’t I be…?” She paused, “What would be a good handle for me?”

“Vixen,” Sara said, grinning lasciviously.

“That’s perfect!” Tam squealed. “Vixen,” she tested it on her tongue. “Tam Fox aka Vixen; I love it!”

“That is kind of clever,” Felicity said reluctantly. “After all, ‘Vixen’ is another word for a female fox.”

“Among other things,” Sara said lowly.

Tam grinned excitedly, “And it would go with the animal necklace; tie it all together! That dog head thing looks kind of like a fox, right?”

“I’ve never seen it but I think it would have to be a fox,” Sara said slowly. “Do they even have wolves in Africa?”

“I think they do, I don’t know,” Felicity shrugged. “I know they have something called a Bat-eared Fennec Fox though.” She looked at them, “Animal Planet is my jam.”

“Bat ears; perfect!” Tam said with a toothy grin. “Oh, just love it when a plan comes together! Makes me want to totally squee!”

“If you want to make high pitched noises of pleasure, I have a few ideas,” Sara said with another appreciative look.

Felicity shot her a dirty look, “Seriously, you’re squidding me out here.”

“You’re just jealous because you’re no longer the only girl in your family I want to sleep with,” Sara told her, sticking out her tongue childishly.

“You want to sleep with me?” Tam asked with a wide grin. “Thank you; that’s so sweet! If it wasn’t for Tim, I’d so go there. The first time I set eyes on you I thought, ‘Man, I would totally do her’. ” She grinned, “I always had a thing for petite blondes.”

“That’s me; sweet and then some,” Sara told her with a toothy grin. “If you and Tim should ever break up, call me. Or even if you don’t, I’m good with the three’s company thing if you are.”

Tam raised one eyebrow, her eyes wandering over Sara’s figure playfully, “Well, I have been wondering what to get him for his birthday… Tell you what, if by July he hasn’t pissed me off and you and Luke aren’t still knocking boots, I’ll give you a call.” She winked at her then went back to the racks.

She turned to Felicity and mouthed ‘Two down; one to go.’

Felicity just rolled her eyes and snuck some Monique Lhuillier into her rack while Tam’s attention was elsewhere.

Hey, all’s far in war and clothes.
“You should get a codename, too,” Tam told Felicity just as she managed to bury the garment bags in between some Calvin Klein.

“Field operators get handles and, according to Bruce at least, I’m ‘only’ a tech, remember?” Felicity said with an edge of resentment in her tone.

“Barbara has a handle,” Tam said ignoring her sarcasm.

“She’s right, you do need a handle,” Sara told her. “All joking aside you should have had one for a while now.”

“Why do I need a handle?” Felicity asked as she looked at a raspberry colored Gucci cocktail dress carefully before sticking it in her ‘keep’ pile. “Seriously, all I do half the time is monitor coms and I’m not even doing that right now.”

“Still, you should get one just to have it,” Tam told her. “Bruce accused you of basically not being a real vigilante, right?”

“Yeah, and so did Ollie even though he should know better. How many times you have to prove it by pulling our asses out of the fire before he sees that is beyond me,” Sara said chiming in as she tossed a cream colored one shoulder Lanvin jumpsuit on her pile along with a couple of pairs of miniskirts and some blouses.

“It might not change their minds but if you had an identity of your own then maybe it will help you feel, I don’t know, more confident?” She suggested.

“Tam’s right,” Sara told her. “When I’m me I just feel like ‘Sara’ but when the Canary comes out it’s like she’s a completely different person.”

Tam frowned, “So is that why all you masks talk about yourselves in the third person?”

“First off, thank you for mentioning the weird third person thing!” Felicity said to her sister. “Glad to know I wasn’t the only one thinking it. As for the handle; fine. What do you suggest?”

Both women looked at each other before turning to her.

“We really shouldn’t be the ones to pick your handle,” Sara said, scratching behind her ear. “I mean, it’s going to be your identity; it should be personal to you.”

“If it’s personal to me then I’m going with ‘Felicity’,” she told them. “It’s worked for me so far.”

“You can’t use your own name,” Tam gave her a wilting glare. “Besides, there aren’t a whole lot of ‘Felicity’s’ around. If someone calls your name out over the coms wouldn’t that be bad?”

“Very bad,” Sara said, eyeballing Felicity pointedly.

“Fine,” she sighed. “Any suggestions at least?”

Tam tapped her finger against her lips as she thought out loud, “It should be something clever, something that you identify personally with but isn’t obvious…”

“What? Like Vixen?” Felicity asked dryly.

“Or Black Canary,” Sara told her. “I picked it because it kind of helped me keep my focus, you know?”
Tam’s eyes lit up with curiosity, “What do you mean?”

“When you join the League of Assassins you have to give up your old identity completely and choose a new name.” Sara’s gaze grew distant and her voice muted as it always did when she thought about her past, “Nyssa used to call me ‘Ta-er al-Asfer’, which means ‘yellow bird’ in Arabic because of the color of my hair. When I took that as my new name she thought it was because of her but, the truth was, it reminded me of my dad.” She smiled slightly, her focus returning as she spoke, “He got me a canary when I was ten and every time I’d hear my new name it was like I still had a piece of my family with me.”

“That’s nice,” Tam said with a compassionate look. “Why ‘Black Canary’ and not just ‘Canary’ then.”

“Well, to be honest it just sounded kind of bad-ass,” Sara joked even though there was still a shadow behind her eyes.

Felicity knew the truth about why Sara chose the handle she did. One night over alcohol fueled revelations she had confessed that the name ‘Black Canary’ was chosen as a form of punishment. It was a reminder, not only of the family she had left behind, but also of the fact that the girl she had been when she boarded the Queen’s Gambit was dead and in her place stood a killer, a woman who was the exact opposite of the innocent young girl she had once been. After she reconnected with her family she began to refer to herself as just ‘Canary’ instead. Felicity had taken it to mean that she was, at long last, finally beginning to heal and let go of the past.

If anyone deserved a clean slate, it was Sara.

“I don’t know if I can think of anything meaningful to base a codename on,” Felicity said drawing Tam’s attention back to her so Sara would have time recover from the invading memories. “Until I got involved with Bruce and Oliver I never really did anything; my life was fairly boring.”

“I know that can’t be true,” Sara snorted.

“No, she was really boring. Seriously,” Tam said flatly.

“Thank you,” Felicity shot back.

“Sorry Baby, but it’s true,” Tam said pertly. “I thought for sure you’d wind up as a crazy cat lady if you didn’t break out of the rut you were in.”

“What rut?” Sara asked.

Before Felicity could object Tam answered, “Baby has always been kind of a social disaster area. Seriously; I used to have to drag her from the house kicking and screaming. She never went to any parties, never dated anybody; I’m telling you, if Bruce hadn’t taken the initiative in the Batcave she’d still be a hopeless virgin trapped in a love triangle with Ben and Jerry.”

“It can’t have been that bad,” Sara said shaking her head.

“I was a late bloomer,” Felicity muttered.

“Late bloomer my ass,” Tam shot back before turning again to Sara. “It’s like she’d go out of her way to make herself invisible. Half the time when the papers would run a profile on Dad she wouldn’t even be in the picture and, if she did stick around long enough for the photographers, they’d run our names and list her as the ‘unknown friend of the family’.”
“You’re kidding, right?” Sara said, her brow furrowed in consternation. She turned to Felicity, “Is she serious?”

“It’s no big deal,” Felicity said lightly as she adopted a good natured grin. “We used to make a game of it.”

“It’s true,” Tam said as she grabbed a load of Carolina Herrera gowns and skirts off the rack and added all of them onto Felicity’s pile. “These are more your style than mine.”

“Thanks,” Felicity said absentmindedly as she sorted through them.

“What kind of game?” Sara asked.

Tam grinned, “From the time Luke and I hit puberty we were constantly getting into one scandal or another in the press but no one ever seemed to notice Baby.”

“To be fair, you guys were kind of begging for it. Ask Luke about the Ambassador’s daughter some time,” Felicity said ruefully.

“Okay, I mean we were both a little wild,” she conceded, “but the press seemed to be obsessed with everything we did during that whole ‘celebutante’ fad, but Baby was completely off the grid. She was always the well-behaved kid, you know, but it was absolutely ridiculous how she could be standing in the same room with us, sometimes in the same picture, and somehow everyone but us would completely forget she was even there.”

“Was it a race thing?” Sara asked carefully. “You guys are a pretty unusual family; maybe it was a case of indirect racism?”

“We’re not as liberal on the East Coast as the West Coast but that wasn’t it; not all of it anyway,” Tam told her. “Stupid people exist here, yeah, but this is Gotham; one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. We know a lot of racially blended families and they have no problems getting the names right when they do stories on them. Heck, Noah Cedars, head of WayneTech, is Jewish, gay, married to a black guy from the Netherlands who is half is age, and they adopted two Chinese girls and a little boy from Haiti; talk about diversity! No, it was all Baby. She has a magic power like Harry Potter and his invisibility cloak only it’s Felicity Fox and her uncanny ability to turn into a wallflower.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Felicity objected.

“It’s true,” Tam said, ignoring her. “Dad used to point to Baby and say, ‘Why can’t you two keep out of trouble like your little sister does?’ and Luke and I would argue that if Baby had her own paparazzi she’d get in trouble all the time, too.”

Felicity sighed, “So it became a standing gag after that.” She shook her head and muttered, “The two of them just love making up these completely off the wall games. They can’t pick anything normal to amuse themselves with like Monopoly; no, it has to be this elaborate points system crap no one else but them can even understand much less win.”

Her sister grinned evilly. “We had a paparazzi points system for one entire summer and the person with the lowest points had to buy the other two take out for a whole month,” Tam told her.

“And considering how much Luke eats, that can quickly add up to a small fortune, let me tell you,” Felicity grumbled.

“What kind of points system?” Sara asked.
Tam smiled brightly, “Every time they brought up Luke’s scandal with the Ambassador’s daughter or the time he beat up that lacrosse player he’d get a hundred points, two hundred if they used the phrase ‘Bad Boy of Gotham, Lusty Luke Fox’, and a thousand points if they brought up the fact that he was graduating early from MIT with honors.”

Felicity tilted her head towards her sister, “Every time they’d mention the name of some former child star or rock musician Tam was supposedly dating she’d get a hundred points, two hundred if they speculated on any tattoos or piercings in, shall we say, intimate areas, and a thousand points if they brought up the fact that she spoke five languages, graduated at the top of her class at Sarah Lawrence with degrees in Public Relations and Marketing, and received a masters in Film from La Fémis in Paris.”

“And anytime they even mentioned Felicity’s name, even if it was just to list her as a member of the family, she got 10,000 points,” Tam said. “Guess how many points she ended up with by the end of the summer?”

“How many?” Sara asked.

“Zero,” Felicity sighed.

“Really?” Sara frowned.

“No big deal,” she said lightly. “Trust me; I had no desire to be followed around by a mob of reporters with flash bulbs going off in my face all the time.”

But Sara wasn’t laughing, “That’s not funny. Why didn’t your dad say anything to the reporters doing the articles?”

“He did,” Tam told her. “He used to get mad as a hornet whenever it would happen and demand a retraction. When Newsweek ran that whole ‘Businessman’s Businessman’ thing again a few years ago and said that dad had two children instead of three, he about lost his shit over it. He called Jim Impoco personally and threatened to pull all of Wayne Enterprises and their subsidiaries advertising because of it.”

“What happened?” Sara asked.

Tam shrugged, “Baby told him to let it go.”

“Why?”

“It wasn’t worth it,” Felicity answered. “Besides, if I had grown up splashed all over Page Six there’s no way I could have ever stayed under the radar. I wouldn’t have been able to work for Bruce or Oliver’s missions because everyone would be too busy reporting my every movement and how the ‘other’ Fox heiress was spotted hanging around the ‘Bad Boy Billionaires’. Not to mention the fact that she’d be hounded with the whole ‘daughter of the bleach blonde husband stealing Vegas cocktail waitress’ shtick, something that was always bound to come up eventually.

“I suppose that makes sense,” Sara said doubtfully. “Is that why you never told the rest of the team who your family was?”
“Wait, you didn’t even mention me?” Tam swung around with a hurt expression on her face.

“Only to Sara and her father but I did tell Oliver about you guys after dad showed up,” Felicity told her. “And, to be honest, I didn’t intentionally hide anything to begin with, I just never brought it up and no one ever asked.”

“Really?” Sara and Tam both looked at her.

“Ollie never asked about your family at all?” Sara said disbelievingly. “Not once?”

“Why would he?” Felicity snorted.

“Because even when we were together he seemed to have such a soft spot for you,” Sara told her. “To tell you the truth, I was kind of jealous for a while there.”

“Yeah well, other than our one utter disaster of a night together there was never anything personal between me and Oliver,” she assured her. “I was just another piece of equipment lying around the Lair for the most part.”

Sara looked like she was about to object when Tam broke in, “Speaking of stupid men in masks; so is it over between you and Bruce or are you just punishing him a little?”

Felicity sat heavily on top of a large steamer trunk and shrugged half-heartedly, “I don’t know. On one hand, he had a real breakthrough and actually admitted how he felt for once but, on the other hand, he still thinks of me as this helpless little doll he has to pack in cotton wool, you know? It’s like he doesn’t respect my skills or acknowledge the fact that I’ve grown since the last time we were together. He wants me to just fall in line and blindly obey him like a good little wifey-poo.” She scowled, “I’m just not willing to do that, sorry.”

“He’s an ass,” Tam said dismissively. “All masks are asses—present company excluded.” Tam held out a hanger with an unstructured tan suede jacket, white open necked shirt, and olive slacks. “How do you feel about Brunello Cucinelli again?”

Felicity pulled a face, “I like his cashmere but hate everything else. Some people can wear it but I always wind up looking like a Scottish bag lady in his clothes.”

“Sara?” She offered.

The other woman looked at it speculatively, “Eh, okay. I can always give it to Sin. She’s a couple of sizes larger than I am but that looks like it’s on the baggy side.”

“I don’t even know why I stole that outfit to begin with,” Tam said handing it over. “I think it just got swept up in the rush.” She picked another labeled garment bag and held it up, “Burberry?”

Felicity immediately held up her hand then paused, “Wait; Prorsum, London, or Brit?”

Tam unzipped the bag and peeked inside, “Prorsum.”

“Give it to Sara,” she told her.

“Hey, unlike you I’m not that picky,” Sara said reaching for it. “Nice,” she nodded.

“I’m just more into their coats than the clothes,” Felicity told her. “Although their sweaters are nice, too.”

“You and your freaking sweaters; I wonder if there’s a rehab for people who have an addiction to
designer cashmere and Donna Karan? What about this Alice+Olivia dress?” She held up the deep green sixties style sheath dress for her inspection.

“No green,” Felicity said looking at it regrettfully. “At least not that shade of green.”

“Why not?” Tam asked with a frown as she looked at it again. “This is totally your thing and it would go great with your coloring.”

“I can’t,” Felicity said uncomfortably.

“Oliver,” Sara said, recognizing the similarity between the color of the dress and the Arrow’s leathers.

“So?” Tam said with a snort. “A) He’s not here and B) you could wear it as a sort of homage to Team Arrow.”

“Yeah, that’s nice in theory but Oliver doesn’t exactly wear green because he likes that color,” Felicity said quietly, busying herself by sorting through another rack of clothes and pulling out a couple of nice Gucci pantsuits. She really needed to start wearing pants, especially if this weather didn’t let up soon. It was nineteen degrees that morning and, thanks to an arctic air mass sweeping down from Canada, it felt like minus ten degrees Fahrenheit instead.

God, she missed summer.

“Come to think of it, I’ve never once seen you wear green,” Sara said thoughtfully.

“I figured it would be too much like rubbing salt in old wounds,” she shrugged. “Maybe that’s just stupid, I don’t know. I doubt Oliver would have noticed if I wore it or not. I sincerely doubt he’s ever noticed anything I wore; I probably could’ve walked into the Lair naked some days and he wouldn’t have batted an eyelash.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” Sara said wryly. “Still, for the record, whether or not Ollie ever got his head out of his butt long enough to notice your deliciously naked bootyliciousness, *I* would have noticed *big time*.”

“You’re just going for the Fox Family Naked Scrabble Triple Word Score,” she snorted.

“Oh, I’m gonna get there, don’t you worry,” Sara said with a toothy grin. “Speaking of which, just to put it out there, I can trace the entire Russian alphabet backwards with my tongue.”

Tam smirked at her coquettishly, “Tak mozhet ya. Only I can do it in *five* languages,” she leaned in slightly, “fluently.”

Sara blinked at her, her mouth parted slightly, “I’m so moving here.”

She winked at her then turned back to her sister, “Sure? Last chance?” Felicity waved her off and Tam rolled her eyes at her, “Well, whatever,” Tam said, putting it on her rack. “I don’t give a crap about stupid Oliver and his hang-ups so *I’m* keeping it.” She grabbed a few more garment bags, “More Diane Von Furstenberg for Sara and some Lela Rose for Felicity,” Tam said tossing yet more bags their way.

“Wait,” Sara said, holding out her hand in a gesture of defeat. “There is no way I can take all this with me back to Starling. I mean, I don’t even have enough shoes for all this stuff!”

“That’s in the next unit across the hall,” Tam said distractedly as she looked over an entire rack of
Stella McCartney. “I can’t believe I forgot I had this.”

Felicity peeked over her own rack to see what she was looking at, “Ooh, can I have--?”

“No,” Tam told her. “All for me.”

“Greedy,” she muttered.

“Vince?” Tam called out.

“Sara,” Felicity told her.

“Wait, I...ooh, more leather?” Sara said reaching to take it before she stopped herself. “No, seriously, what am I going to do with all of this?”

“Rent a storage unit?” Felicity said under her breath.

“Baby already said you could leave some of it at the penthouse,” Tam told her. “Hey, Valentino?”

Felicity shook her head, “Too fussy for me. All the beading weighs a ton and it looks like a tablecloth after a bunch of kindergarteners finish with their arts and crafts projects.”

“You have no taste,” Tam said placing it on the charity pile. “I swear I don’t know where I ever went wrong with you but at least the Foundation will appreciate it.”

“I thought we were being anti-Bat; how can you still move in if you’re giving him the cold shoulder?” Sara said with a frown.

“We are but I’m keeping the penthouse this time,” Felicity said as she looked over a colorful chiffon halter top maxi dress and added it to her ever-growing pile. “I need it as my base of operations if I’m going to be handling this alone while you’re away and, besides, he pissed me off.”

“He actually told you that you weren’t allowed to pursue this even though they’ve been operating under his nose for how long?” Tam said pulling a face.


“Wait; was that an Emilio Pucci?” Tam said catching sight of the chiffon on top of Felicity’s stack. “I call dibs!”

“Too late,” she told her.

“There’s no way you’ll ever wear that,” Tam said with a stubborn set to her jaw. “You hate maxi-dresses; you keep saying they make you look like Dumpy the Eighth Dwarf.”

“Fine,” she told her, “but in exchange I get some of that Stella McCartney, all of the Oscar de la Renta, the Michael Kors, and the Ralph Lauren and you can have the Emilio Pucci, the Naeem Khan, the Chloe, and the Christian Siriano.”

“You can have the Stella blazers and one dress but yes to everything else except the Siriano,” Tam said with a shudder. “What is with that guy and ruffles anyway? There’s only like one decent dress in his whole collection. Put all that stuff in the section for the Foundation people.”

“Project Runway was a blight on the universe,” Felicity said in agreement.

“Is Bruce going to be okay with you keeping the apartment?” Sara asked.
“If I know Bruce, and I do,” Felicity said slowly, “he’ll insist on it. Having me in his penthouse will make him feel as though I’m still under his protection and that he’s keeping an eye on me when, in reality, we’re going to stage a coup and take over the alternate Batcave for our own purposes.”

“We?” Tam said perking up. “Me too?”

“All of us,” Felicity told her. “Me, you, Sara, and Barbara and, if he can be turned, Tim. I think I made some pretty good headway with that yesterday.”

“Tim’s not a problem,” Tam said dryly. “I’ll just tell him to do it and he’ll fall in line. What’s the plan? After all, Tim and Barbara are already on their way to Starling; how much help can they be?”

“Luke said he’s going down there as well just for a day or two,” Sara spoke up. “He said he wants to check out the situation down there before he leaves for Africa in a couple more weeks but I have a feeling he’s sticking around for me,” she said with a satisfied grin. “The minute I told him I was heading down there he said he could use a few days of sunny Starling Weather so he hopped the jet with them this morning.”

“Tell me about it; sunshine isn’t exactly easy to come by these days. I swear I saw a pigeon frozen to the sidewalk on the way over here,” she grumbled. “They offered to take you, too right?” Felicity asked.

“Yeah, but I wanted to help you guys go through all this stuff first. Plus, I wanted the scoop on your angry revenge sex with Batman.”

Felicity shot Tam a look, “Really?”

“What? I called her after you so rudely hung up on me yesterday,” she said with a shrug. “Who else am I going to talk about this stuff? Tim was pouting and hiding in the bathroom, Barbara is good for a gossip but I figured she’d be busy getting ready to leave, and I felt the need for girl talk. Speaking of which, hey Sara; I’ll trade you that Versace for some Ralph Rucci.”

“I’m keeping the Versace,” Sara told her. “This is totally me; just look at it.” She held it against herself. “Crop tops, black leather, and lots of hardware? Totally mine.”

“We’ve created a monster,” Tam told Felicity in mock dismay.

“This one is strong with the Force,” Felicity agreed. “If you want Versace you can have this one as long as I can have those two L’Wren Scott dresses you have on your rack over there.”

“All of the clothes you like look the same,” Tam chided her even as she handed over the armload of clothes. “By the way, there’s some more non-green Alice+Olivia and a few Dolce & Gabbana’s in that pile because I know how much you love your A-line skirts and sweater sets.”

“You make fun but I have a style that works for me,” Felicity sniffed in mock disdain.


“More like classic and feminine,” she retorted.

“So what would you call my style?” Sara asked them.

“Butch,” they both said at the same time.

“Really?” Sara said with a squeak. “You think I’m butch?”
“Not really,” Felicity conceded. “More like um…”

“Lipstick Leather Princess,” Tam finished for her.

“I guess that’s better than butch,” Sara shrugged. “So what exactly did happen with you and Bruce, what’s our game plan, and what the hell is wrong with this coat?” She said holding out a shaggy cream colored Lanvin fake fur at arm’s length as though it could attack at any moment.

“Oh no,” Felicity said looking at it and immediately waving her off. “Not it.”

“Yeah,” Tam said cringing. “At the time I thought it looked kind of interesting and 70’s kitschy but now it just looks a little too abominable snowman; on a positive note though it is fake fur.”

“Of course it’s fake; it looks like you skinned a muppet,” Felicity snorted.

“Stick it in the Foundation pile,” Tam told her. “Okay, back to the game plan.”

“Tomorrow morning the decorator is coming by the penthouse to present the designs. I want you,” she turned to Tam, “to take over that for me while I stop by Orbital and make friends.”

“I get to be in charge of the decorating?” Tam asked wide-eyed. “Oh thank GOD! Now maybe the place will actually be livable; what else?”

Felicity gave her a nasty look, “Okay, thanks for that, by the way. I do have taste you know.”

“Bruce is paying for this right?” Tam said in a superior tone.

She scowled, “Yeah, so?”

“He’s like the seventh richest guy in the world and I bet you picked some kind of shabby chic ‘decorate on the cheap’ theme using recycled materials and front porch antiques because you didn’t want to spend too much,” she said knowingly.

Felicity’s lips tightened in consternation, “Actually, as of last year he’s the fourth richest guy in the world and shabby chic is very in right now.”

“So you say,” she snorted.

Felicity gave her sister a withering glare, “As I was saying, Bruce will undoubtedly show up and try to intimidate you into revealing my location but you won’t because the Fox sisters have a natural immunity against all things grim and Bat. Oh, and don’t go overboard with the decorating thing despite the fact that a billionaire is footing the bill,” she said shooting her another dirty look. “If you don’t like my ideas, fine; but I want to get moved in as soon as the paint dries. In fact, I’m moving in tonight, at least for a while, so try to get them to use something low-odor on the walls, okay? And try to get it done fast; that means no customized furniture or anything that will keep us out of there for months—and no modern! You already know how much I hate that crap so don’t even try to convince me that modern contemporary doesn’t count. You can have full reign except in the master bedroom and the office. At the very least, I want to keep the bed, chest, and armoire in the master suite and no going into the office period since that’s the secret entrance to the Felicity Cave.”

“The Felicity Cave?” Sara repeated slowly.

“Barbara has a cool clock tower inside the original Wayne Building in Old Gotham so I get a Felicity Cave,” she told her.
“Barbara lives in a clock tower, too?” Sara said with a bemused grin. “Woman after my own heart. Clock towers aren’t exactly easy to come by, you know,” she frowned. “Stupid ARGUS blew mine up, damn it.”

“Since Lyla blew it up in order to save my ass as I was being chased by a mob of enraged supersoldiers, I’m not complaining,” Felicity told her.

“Hey wait, why do you get the master suite?” Tam objected, completely ignoring the ‘enraged mob’ comment as it had nothing to do with her. “Shouldn’t we flip for it or draw straws?”

“I get the master because A) I’m sleeping with Bruce and it’s his penthouse B) My stuff is already in there and C) We both know that I can’t keep my legs closed around him for more than a couple of days at a time and he’s going to want to do it in his own bed,” she said rolling her eyes. “Zander, that’s the decorator, can add a few pieces or take some away but leave those three pieces alone. And no touching any of the clothes in there until we’ve sorted out all of these storage units once and for all!” She sighed and looked around at the mess they had barely even touched even though they’d been in there most of the morning already. It was going to take several days of going back and forth before they would be ready to call Mama T’s assistant and have her send another van to pick up the rest for the charity drive.

“Fine; besides, now that we’re going to be living together your closet is my closet anyway. Anything specific you want other than the bed and dressers or can I really go hog wild as long as I keep them on schedule?” She asked.

Felicity thought about what her sister’s version of ‘hog wild’ might entail and a chill ran down her spine. “No, forget I said anything about you having free reign. That’s too much power for you to hold over the rest of us. Zander mentioned a kind of eclectic blend of Tuscan and Southern Elegance; do that,” she told her. “On your bedroom though, go wild.”

“I don’t care what you do to my bedroom as long as I have a place to lay my head and my own bathroom,” Sara told her when Tam turned inquisitively in her direction. “I’m easy,” she added with a flirtatious wink.

“Good to know,” Tam said, returning the flirt. “Tuscan eclectic, huh?” She wrinkled her nose at the idea, “Eh, I guess I can work with that. We’ll see, but I’m not promising anything,” she said then cut Felicity off before she could argue. “What do you want me to tell Bruce specifically?”

“Just tell him I had another appointment somewhere and leave it at that. If he asks for an address tell him you don’t know where it’s located or what I’m doing exactly, only that I asked you to do me a favor.”

“But I don’t know where it’s located or what you’re doing there,” she blinked.

“Exactly, so it shouldn’t be all that hard to pull it off,” Felicity said wryly.

“Are you going to be okay going in alone?” Sara asked, her expression going from casual to all business.

“I can’t take tech in there but I’ll set up an alert on Watchtower if I don’t check in within a certain time period. It’ll have my location and all the specifics attached and it’ll go straight to Bruce and ping the rest of your phones plus the LAIR.”

“We’ll be in Starling though,” Sara frowned. “I won’t be able to get to you if something goes wrong and, even if Ollie can scramble a jet, we’re still talking five or six hours at least.”
“I have backups to my backups,” Felicity waved her concerns away with a note of resignation. “If you get the alert and I can’t be reached then call Barry in Central City and have him go all Flash, but only as a last resort. He has his own deal and Bruce will not be happy to have yet another mask on his turf but needs must and all that. He can be in Gotham in a matter of minutes if he puts on the speed.”

“Barry?” Tam asked, perking up suddenly.

“The Flash,” Sara answered for her. “He’s a sort of ex of your sister’s from Central City.”

“The meta guy who runs fast?” Tam asked in high-pitched surprise.

“He’s not an ex,” Felicity clarified. “We danced one time at a party of Oliver’s and he didn’t even ask me out; Oliver asked him out for me and we just both happened to be there.”

“How many masked heroes do you know anyway?” Tam snorted.

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “They just keep popping up out of the woodwork. I think I’m cursed or something.”

“You know, seriously though, that thing you told Bruce about how you were really the Arrow and you recruited all these vigilantes into some kind of super hero team? You could really do that; like for real,” Tam said in earnest.

“That’s…not a bad idea,” Sara said slowly. “Kind of like the League of Assassins only with vigilantes.”

“Yeah right,” Felicity snorted. “I could call it the Super Friends or, better yet, The Justice League, and we could get Tam to do all of our PR when she isn’t running around in her Vixen costume. We could fund it all by marketing the team’s likenesses on lunch boxes, action figures, and Saturday morning cartoon shows for the kiddies because what cop is going to arrest the hero his kid dressed like for Halloween?”

Tam and Sara stared at her then at each other.

“I know she was just joking but, is it just me, or did that sound like a really good idea?” Sara asked quietly.

“A way to network all the known vigilantes together while generating income and positive press in support of their missions? In addition to everything else I’m pretty sure Felicity is a marketing savant,” Tam agreed.

“Can we please get back to the subject at hand?” Felicity told them. She turned to Sara, “Can you be back by Wednesday?”

“Barring any complications, sure,” Sara agreed.

“Starting Wednesday you’re going in with me to the OO facility and act as my back up. On the off-chance Bruce hunts you down and confronts you, just be honest with him even if it burns me; he’s a living lie detector and he doesn’t react well to people outside his circle of trust to begin with. I’d rather have you lay it all on the line than risk you getting hurt or placed permanently on his shit list. As for tomorrow, try to give me at least a day to gather intel and then I’ll go back to Bruce with what I have and, in case I do miss my check-in, tell Barb to call in the Calvary. After I text you the all clear then you can tell Tim.” She sighed, “Tim knows about all of this but I told him I wouldn’t go in without back up. What I didn’t tell him was my backup is Tam.”
“Hey, I kick major butt as back up,” Tam said confidently. “I’ve saved Tim’s bacon a few times, thank you.”

Sara nodded, “What about Luke and the rest?”


“Luke is almost as overprotective as Bruce,” Felicity agreed. “Let me gather my intel and work on Bruce and then we’ll deal with the rest of them. Meantime I’m going to teach Tam how to operate Watchtower as my alternate.”

“You know computers, too?” Sara asked in surprise.

“Well, I am a Fox and I’m sleeping with a computer prodigy/mask who happens to also be the son of Batman,” Tam shrugged. “I was never as into tech as Luke and Felicity but I can do what needs to be done. I’m no hacker but I can read a computer screen and use a headset at least. It’s just making phone calls, right; kind of like a superhero switchboard operator or Skype?”

“I’ll work on making the alternate Watchtower as user friendly as I can,” Felicity said to avoid directly commenting on her sister’s computer savvy or lack thereof. “After the decorators leave she’ll patch into Watchtower and connect with Barb; that will be your signal. Hopefully I’ll be with her, if not then you guys need to scramble.”

“I still don’t know if I like this plan,” Sara said grimly.

“It’s just recon,” Felicity told her. “Besides, if they were going to do anything to me they would have done it last week when I was completely alone in this.”

“Again, that was a bonehead move, by the way,” Sara reiterated.

“I lived and it’s done; now we just need to keep Bruce off my ass long enough for me to get inside,” Felicity told her.

“Fine,” Sara said but she could tell she wasn’t happy about it.

“I’ll be okay, Sara,” Felicity repeated confidently. “I’ve got this.”

“If you say so,” she sighed.

Tam chose that moment to decide it was time for a change of subject, “Now that the hero stuff is out of the way I want some sexy details on Bruce. We all got to hear what an asshat he can be, so when do we get to hear about the neck down?”

Sara held up her hand, suddenly perking up, “Seconded!”

Felicity flushed, “The last thing I want to do right now is discuss Bruce; especially a naked Bruce.”

“Details! Details! Details!” Both women began to chant together.

“Oh my God, it’s like you’re both still in high school or something,” Felicity said shaking her head.

“Come on, let’s go look through the next unit for shoes and accessories and then we’ll get the scoop on the Bat,” Tam said, “And the rest of Bruce too for that matter.”

“Good one,” Sara snorted giving her a high five as she followed them out dragging her own two full racks of clothes behind her.
“I hate you,” Felicity said as she struggled to drag her booty into the corridor as well. “Both of you.”

Several minutes later all three women were on their hands and knees rooting around several sealed plastic containers filled to the brim with designer footwear, scarves, and even more clothing.

“You could open your own store, I swear,” Sara said shaking her head as she looked around the unit.

“The opening my own store thing is a good idea; the only problem is that all the clothes are fours and the shoes are all a size six,” Tam said with a crooked smile. “Talk about a limited consumer base.”

“Do I even want to know how much these cost or should I just throw them in my pile and live in blissful ignorance?” Sara asked she looked down at the Valentino studded boots she was wearing.

“Don’t ask,” Felicity advised her. “Just keep telling yourself it was free.”

“That’s what I do,” Tam said as she slipped on a strappy pair of Prada’s. “Okay Baby, now talk.”

“Fine, what do you want to know?” She grumbled.

“Oh, I know!” Sara piped up. “Who’s better in the sack; Ollie or Bruce?”

“Yes!” Tam squealed. “Talk!”

Felicity flushed a deep crimson and looked from one woman to the other before settling her gaze on her sister, “Why do you care; you’ve never even met Oliver!”

“But I’ve seen pictures!” She told her, “Plus, I’m heading down there sooner or later and it would be nice to get a feel for the lay of the land, if you know what I mean.”

“What about Tim?” Felicity pointed out archly.

“Buzzkil,” Tam said sticking out her tongue. “Besides I didn’t say I’d do anything,” Tam grumbled, “I just have a very fertile imagination.”

“Well, I have slept with Ollie, a lot, and I want to know if I should be giving my girl here some friendly competition when it comes to Mr. Tall, Dark, and Nocturnal,” Sara said with a grin.

“If you want Bruce, go for it,” Felicity said off-handedly as she was obviously just kidding.

“You are so full of shit!” Sara snorted, not buying it for a second. “Now tell; who’s better?”

Felicity closed her eyes and sighed heavily, her cheeks burning like she had a third degree sunburn, “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” she muttered. “Okay, well, where should I start?”

“I vote we start with size and move on from there,” Tam said with a smarmy grin.

“Oh hell yes!” Sara laughed. “Which flies straighter; Bruce’s Bat or Ollie’s Arrow?”

“God!” Felicity whined as she rubbed her cheeks in mortification. “Actually, they’re pretty much the same size, you know, down there.”

“Really?” Sara said her grin getting even wider if that was even possible.

“Is that good?” Tam asked Sara.

Sara bit her lip and nodded, “Oh yeah.”
“Really?” Tam said roundly as she gave her sister a tongue touched smile. “Baby, you’ve been holding out. So are they completely alike or are there subtle differences?”

“Well,” she cleared her throat nervously, “Um, you know how Bruce was born at his family’s home in Scotland?”

“Bruce is Scottish?” Sara asked in surprise. “I always thought he was American.”

“She goes from talking about his dick to Scotland and that’s the first question you ask?” Tam said, throwing Sara an incredulous look before turning back to her sister. “Are you trying to throw us off with a ramble or is there a point to that non sequitur you just threw out there?”

“There’s a point,” Felicity said, her face flaming. She turned to Sara, “He is American but his mom went into early labor while they were at his great-uncle’s funeral which was in Scotland. Anyway, you know how in the UK they generally don’t, um…” she bit her lip and looked downwards pointedly.

“Don’t what?” Tam asked in confusion.

“Oh, I get it,” Sara said with a slow, filthy grin.

“Get what?” Tam repeated.

“The pig is still in the blanket,” Sara told her.

“Oh. Oh!” Tam said with a toothy grin. “Oh, those are fun! I always did like a guy with a little extra. So I take it that Oliver…?”

“The weenie is out of the bun,” Sara answered.

“What else is different?” Tam asked eager for more details.

“I don’t know! It’s not like I spent a lot of time looking at that stuff,” Felicity told her. “I mean, I’ve obviously looked at their…stuff, but I was a little too busy to notice a whole lot of details and I wasn’t exactly carrying a tape measure at the time. Besides, I was only with Oliver one night and I’ve only been with Bruce a few times since I’ve been back, so…”

“Wait, what do you mean you haven’t spent a lot of time looking at that stuff?” Sara asked in confusion. “Didn’t you, you know, take a trip down town?”

Before Felicity could answer Tam butted in, “She hasn’t done that yet.”

“Never?” Sara asked, her jaw dropping in surprise.

“Nope,” Tam said shaking her head.

“I haven’t exactly gotten around to it yet, that’s all,” Felicity said defensively. “It’s just that every time I’ve, you know, been with someone I haven’t had a chance to go there.”

“But they went down on you, right?” Sara asked with raised eyebrows.

“Yes,” Felicity breathed as she busied herself by rooting through another box of shoes.

“Then what’s the hold up?” She asked. “I mean, if there is one thing Ollie makes time for it’s getting head.”
“I just...it’s just...” she stammered.

“She’s scared,” Tam said as she tossed Sara a pair of spiked Christian Louboutins.

“I’m not scared,” Felicity said quickly, “it’s just that there’s a lot of...technical things to work through and I just haven’t had a chance to put any of them into practice yet.”

“Technical things?” Sara asked in bemusement. “There’s nothing really all that technical about it, Cutie. You just open wide and in goes the choo choo.”

Tam began to snort from her corner and Felicity flushed an even angrier shade of red. “It’s just, I read this book—”

“Oh God, I wish I had never given you that thing,” Tam muttered under her breath ruefully.

She glared at her sister as she continued, “And it talked about how you’re supposed to do all of this stuff simultaneously with your mouth, your tongue, and your hands and it’s just...”

“Just?” Sara prompted.

“You know how when you’re a kid there’s this thing you do where you pat your head and rub your tummy at the same time?” Felicity asked her. “I could never figure out how to do that.”

For two whole beats there was absolute silence and then both Sara and Tam began to laugh so hard their eyes were watering.

“It’s not funny,” Felicity whined. “It’s just—I’ve never really been all that coordinated...”

After the hilarity had died down to a few stray snickers and chuckles Sara asked, her mascara running slightly as she wiped her eyes with her hands, “Okay, I can see that. Fine,” she snickered again then got herself back under control. “So it’s just a matter of timing it right and then psyching yourself up, right?”

“Well...” Felicity started then cringed.

“Well what?” She asked her, eyes sparkling with barely contained amusement.

“I read this other book...”

“Oh God,” Tam groaned, hiding her head in her hands.

Again Felicity glared at her sister, “And in it they mentioned the, um, taste.”

“The taste?” Sara repeated with great effort.

“They kept saying it tasted like bitter almonds,” she said reluctantly.

“And?” Sara prompted.

“Don’t say it, don’t say it, don’t say it,” Tam muttered under her breath as she held her hand over her eyes.

“I’m allergic to nuts.”

Sara nearly fell over and Tam began to gasp for air as they both howled with great sobs of laughter.
Felicity just shook her head and grimaced at both of them, “I mean, logically I know it’s not really, you know, nuts,” the two women’s laughter reached heretofore unknown peaks of ensuing hilarity, “but part of me is scared it might trigger something anyway. After all, I didn’t know about the nut allergy until the thing with the pot brownie and then that happened as soon as I put it in my mouth-.” At this point the two women were both on the floor and beating the ground with their fists or clutching at their clothes for air.

“Stop talking!” Sara gasped out. “Please stop! I can’t take anymore!”

“Oh my God!” Tam was wailing.

“I hate you both,” Felicity said with a pout.

It took several more minutes to calm down before either Tam or Sara could speak again. “Okay,” Sara said, obviously more in control then she had been the first time, “Let’s just skip that part and move on.”

“Yeah,” Tam said wiping her eyes with a silk scarf, “Here’s a good one: Who gives better Cookie Monster; Oliver or Bruce?”

“Oliver,” Sara said before Felicity could answer.

“How do you know?” Tam asked her.

“I know,” Sara said roundly. “Oliver Queen is a lesbian trapped in a man’s body. He not only can find the little man in the boat, but he can steer into the rapids faster than anyone I have ever known; man or woman, with the exception of Nyssa.” She sighed, “Talk about the cat that ate the Canary; that woman was magic in the sack.”

“Is she right?” Tam asked.

“I never had sex with Nyssa,” she hedged.

“No doh! I meant about Oliver,” Tam snorted.

Felicity’s mouth fell open as she looked from one woman to another but no sound came out.

“You’re kidding,” Sara breathed. “Really?”

Felicity cringed slightly under her intense scrutiny.

“Bruce?” Tam said all agog. “Seriously?”

“Well,” Felicity said clearing her throat, “not that it wasn’t good with Oliver! It was very, very good with both of them! I just… I mean with him it was just the one time and Bruce, um… he’s done it… more.”

“More?” Tam repeated. “What do you mean, ‘more’?”

“I just mean that Bruce, um,” she blushed crimson, “I guess you could say that since he’s had more time to map things out since we’ve been together more often that he already knows which, um, buttons to push… so to speak.”

“She does have a point,” Tam said with a frown. “Sure, I sometimes miss the thrill of a quickie with a stranger but at least with Tim he already knows exactly what curls my toes. It saves time so you can just get your cookie, clean up, and go to sleep afterwards; easy peasy, slick and sleazy, you
“I still can’t believe someone out there has dethroned Oliver ‘Cunnilingus’ Queen,” Sara said shaking her head in amazement. “I’ve been with women who know less about female anatomy than that man. I mean, it’s not just technical skill; he also gets major points for style as well.”

“What do you mean?” Tam asked eagerly.

Sara’s voice dropped to a confidential level as she turned to Tam, “He does this thing where he just takes his time. I mean, he can spend hours just going down on someone and never come up for air. I swear to God, it’s just this slow, unrelenting oral assault.”

“Huh,” Felicity said, thinking back to her own all too similar experience.

“But he gives good cookie, right?” Tam asked. “I mean, it’s not all corn on the cob down there. You know, all teeth and rawr rawr rawr!” She said holding her hands up like claws and gnashing her teeth.

“No,” she said firmly. “I’ve been with some real weed whackers in my time but that man knows how to trim a bush the right way. He has this thing where he starts off slow, I mean really slow; like this almost maddening pace then, just when you think you’re going to scream, he gets down and dirty with it.”

“How dirty?” Tam said, scooting closer.

“Nasty dirty,” she told her. “He likes to switch it up and just talk, I mean talk, as he goes from laid back to all dominant.”

“Ooh, he likes to talk dirty? I love dirty talk,” Tam said eagerly as she bit her lip. “Is he all ‘Say my name!’ and ‘Who’s the dirty girl?’ or what?”

“More like he wants to hear you tell him what he’s doing to you. Not like feedback or anything; he doesn’t make you feel like you have to fill out a survey card afterwards. It’s more like ‘tell me what I’m doing; say it’ and ‘tell me what you want’; that kind of thing. He loves hearing the person he’s with talk dirty and if you stop he kind of holds out until you give him what he wants. It’s actually pretty kinky the way he does it,” she hummed happily. “It always curls my toes, let me tell you.”

“That’s so weird,” Felicity said looking at Sara with a mixture of fascination and, not jealousy, but some other strange emotion she didn’t yet have a word for. “What you just described is exactly what he did with me.”

“Yeah, Ollie has his routine pretty much down pat,” she told her. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, it works, but when the man finds something he likes and does well he doesn’t mess with it. What about Bruce; is he a creature of habit or does he go with the flow so to speak?” Sara asked.

Felicity cleared her throat, “Well,” she took a centering breath, “he’s…intense, I suppose you could say.”

“Oh yeah, I can totally see that,” Tam said roundly.

“It’s never really the same way twice with him and he’s really rough and forceful most of the time, but in a good way. Oliver kisses a lot more and takes more time than Bruce does but with Bruce the sex is…” She wrinkled her nose, “more intimate, I guess; which is weird because Oliver talks more and cuddled afterwards but Bruce…I don’t know how to put it. With Oliver it was intense but it was like he was totally in control the whole time. With Bruce it’s the complete opposite. He’s always so
in control everywhere else but when we’re together it’s like I get to finally see what’s going on underneath the surface. He’s just so raw and open and it feels like… for that one moment in time, for just an instant, it’s like he lets go and the walls come tumbling down.” She looked down at her feet as she struggled to find the right words, her brow furrowed in thought, “It’s like he’s trying to find something; like he’s looking for a safe place and you’re it. I don’t know, I bet that sounds stupid, huh?” She looked up at both women expecting more teasing but instead they were both looking at her with something akin to awe on their faces.

“Wow,” Tam said at last.

“Okay, now I’m totally jealous,” Sara said without so much as a flicker of sarcasm.

“Baby, I hate to tell you this but we’re going to have to go shopping,” Tam said suddenly.

“What?” Both Felicity and Sara looked at her like she was crazy.

“What? I never got around to stealing any wedding dresses,” Tam said easily.

“Wedding dresses?” Felicity said in confusion as Sara began to chuckle softly as she got it.

“She’s saying that not only is that man completely in love with you but you are totally over the moon for him,” Sara said dryly. “Just now, the expression on your face, it was like watching a goddamn epic love story play out in real life.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Felicity denied adamantly.

“Keep telling yourself that, Baby,” Tam said as she leaned forward and patted her arm in sympathy. “Meanwhile, I’m going to start meeting with wedding planners.” She frowned, “Too bad Tim is in Starling; seeing his face later when I walk in with an armload of bridal magazines would have been hilarious.”

“Can I be a bridesmaid?” Sara asked only half-kidding.

“Of course you’re going to be a bridesmaid!” Tam answered for her. “Me, you and Barbara are the bridesmaids and Tim, Dick, and Luke will be the groomsmen. I’ve had this whole thing planned out since the minute she said he asked her to marry him. I already have everything from the colors to the cake picked out in my head.”

Sara and Felicity glanced at each other then back at Tam.

“Not that I’m actually going to marry Bruce, but if it’s my wedding shouldn’t I have some say in it?” Felicity asked.

“No,” Tam told her.

“No?” She asked incredulously.

“No one ever gets the wedding they want,” Tam said seriously. “It’s never about the bride; it’s about the mother of the bride.”

“But you’re her sister,” Sara said dumbly.

“I know that,” Tam said, “but since Baby was my Hanukah gift, that makes me her mom by proxy in this case.”

“Hanukah gift?” Sara asked with a growing grin.
“Please don’t tell this story,” Felicity muttered under her breath.

“Didn’t Baby ever tell you how she got her name?” Tam asked then threw her sister a disgruntled look. “Of course, you never mentioned us.”

“Well, she definitely has the Jewish mom guilt down pat,” Felicity muttered.

“Please tell me the story,” Sara said with a huge evil grin. “Oh pretty please with sugar on top.”

Felicity fixed her with a hard eye, “I hate you; so, so much.”

“I’ll be happy to,” Tam said triumphantly. “When I was four I wanted a baby doll that could walk and talk and do everything a real baby did. Our dad worked with robots and tech stuff so I asked him to build me one. He just laughed at me and said he’d try but that he didn’t think it was possible. Still, he was our dad and I thought he could do anything so I just knew he was going to build me my very own baby. Mom kept telling me that you couldn’t build real babies in a lab and got me a ton of dolls that year hoping I’d let it go but I was convinced that when Dad told us he had a surprise for us and that he wanted us to meet someone special, that he finally built me my baby after all. Well, it was our first Hanukah after our parents split and Luke and I were spending part of the holiday with Dad and Evie, Felicity’s mom. We hadn’t met them yet so when Dad answered the door holding Baby I decided that she was my present right then and there. The minute I saw her I ran up to him and took her out of his arms and told them that she was mine. I wouldn’t even open any of my other presents because I already had my Baby.” She batted her eyes in Felicity’s direction with a toothy grin. “I spent the whole weekend cuddling with her, dressing her up, and playing with her hair and when it came time to go back to Mom’s I threw a fit because they wouldn’t let me take her home with me. It was a total meltdown in the making until Dad promised that ‘Baby’ would be waiting for me when I came back and she’s been stuck with the name ever since, isn’t that right, Baby?”

“And that’s why they call you ‘Baby’?” Sara snickered. “Oh my God, just when I thought you couldn’t get any cuter!”

“I’m happy you find it so amusing; meanwhile I’m the one who had to live with it my entire life. I was almost five before I realized it wasn’t even my real name. My kindergarten teacher kept insisting I write ‘Felicity’ on all of my work and I nearly got expelled because I wrote ‘Baby’ instead of my real name like she told me to.”

“Why would they expel you for that?” Sara asked.

“It wasn’t because she wrote ‘Baby’ on her paper,” Tam told her. “It was what happened after she wrote it that nearly got her expelled.”

“What happened?” Sara asked, intrigued.

Felicity cleared her throat, “I kicked her in the shins, pushed her to the ground, then told her Luke was going to beat her up before stomping out of the classroom so I could go find him. She was kind of mean and a really shitty teacher anyway.” Felicity grumbled. Both women began to laugh at her and she rolled her eyes at them. “You both suck,” she announced flatly.

“Only because we didn’t read the same books you did apparently,” Sara retorted.

Tam snickered as Felicity responded with a rather rude single digit salute.

A couple of hours later, Felicity was dropping off Sara at the private Wayne terminal with a brand
new set of luggage in tow.

“Thank your dad again for arranging all of this,” Sara said for like the hundredth time since she and Tam had revealed that Lucius had arranged for Sara to return to Starling City on one of the Wayne Gulfstreams.

“Yeah well, when Tam told him that you were helping us finally clean out her clothes collection he pretty much knew that flying commercial was out of the question,” Felicity said ruefully.

“You know, on one hand I’m sorry that Tam couldn’t come and see me off but I’m kind of glad it’s just us right now,” Sara said, her tone serious as she faced her. “There’s something that’s been bothering me all afternoon and I wanted to say something to you about it but not in front of your sister.”

“What is it?” Felicity asked taking in her friend’s expression.

“Nothing bad,” she assured her. “It’s just that when Tam was telling that story about you disappearing in plain sight and how you had a habit of making people not see you, it really bothered me.”

Felicity smiled, “Tam didn’t mean—”

“Yeah, I know,” she said quickly. “I’m not upset at Tam.”

She frowned, “Who then?”

“You.”

“Me?” Felicity asked in surprise.

Sara nodded, “Do you remember the first time I left Nyssa and joined the team full time?”

“Yeah,” she said carefully.

“You were a little uncomfortable at first because of how much time I was spending with Ollie.” Felicity started to object but Sara held up her hand to stop her, “I know you weren’t jealous of my romantic relationship with Ollie but when Roy and I joined the team it changed the whole dynamic for a while and you started to fade into the background.”

She shrugged half-heartedly, “Oliver was busy and preoccupied with Slade…”

“No, I don’t mean that Ollie pushed you out; I meant that you purposefully took yourself out of the game for a while,” Sara told her. “At the time I was actually a little grateful for that because things between Ollie and I were breaking down fairly quickly and you gave us plenty of room to work through it. The thing is you also…I don’t know how to put it,” she muttered before meeting her gaze fully. “You made yourself disappear. You were still in the room but you felt like a ghost for a while, so much so that we’d forget you were even there when things got crazy. There were even days when the only person you even spoke to was Diggle. Then when things got really bad and Ollie was stressing over Slade and his family you suddenly appeared again. It was like you were a ghost one minute, and in the next you became his light in the darkness; you stepped out of the shadows, took charge, and woke him up.”

She thought back to that dark period when Thea had been kidnapped by Slade and the entire team was under stress and at each other’s throats. “I didn’t do anything; I just told him what he needed to hear to get the job done.”
“No,” she said firmly. “I’m telling you, it was like you weren’t even there and then you seemed to appear out of thin air. Me, Dig, Ollie, and Roy were all going at it and you just faded away from our line of sight. I think we all forgot you were even in the room. Ollie couldn’t see you because he was so focused on the rest of us and on his family, QC, himself, and then you just shrugged off whatever that thing was you cloaked yourself with and stepped out into the light. You spoke and we all just went silent. It was…” she shook her head, “weird. I’m an assassin; I’m trained to know my surroundings at all times, but you nearly made me jump out of my skin. You didn’t yell, you didn’t scream, but Oliver seemed to laser in on you until you were all he could see. I remember seeing that happen; the look on his face. He went from frantic and angry to intense, calm, and focused. It was instantaneous and you did that.” She smiled sadly, “I knew at that moment that Ollie and I were done because, as much as I loved him and even with all the history we shared, I couldn’t give him what you could just by saying a few words and stepping into his line of sight.”

“It wasn’t like that between us,” Felicity objected.

“I know you weren’t involved, but it was like that,” she told her matter-of-factly. “That’s not my point though. You have a habit of camouflaging yourself to the point that you disappear and it bothers me because sometimes I think you’re losing yourself in the process.”

“I’m not losing myself,” Felicity said quietly.

“Sometimes I think you…” She took a deep breath, “What do you know about starlings?”

“Um,” Felicity frowned, the sudden shift in topic catching her off guard, “unless you’re talking about the city or the cross platform game engine, not much; why?”

“When I was a kid I had a thing for birds.” She gave a wry grimace, “Yeah, ‘Canary’; pretty obvious, right? Still, I liked birds and my mom would take me to the Starling City Zoo’s aviary on the weekends. Since it was the ‘Starling City’ Zoo they had a special exhibit all dedicated to starlings. It was this huge enclosure filled with all different species of these tiny little birds and it was so loud,” she furrowed her brow as though hearing the echoes of it in her memory. “They were all different colors, and had all different kinds of songs, but the two that caught my attention the most were the Common European Starlings and Hildebrandt’s Starlings. Have you ever seen them? The Hildebrandt’s Starlings I mean.”

Felicity shook her head, “Maybe but I’m not sure.” She squinted slightly as she searched her memory, “I think they’re from Africa, right?”

“Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia; basically they’re all over West Africa,” she nodded. “The point is that they’re beautiful. They have this bright iridescent plumage in cobalt blue, rich purple, bright green; they look like tiny little rainbows,” she smiled. “I wanted one so bad. I started reading up on starlings after that and do you know what I found out?” Felicity shook her head in the negative, “As beautiful as that breed of starling is, they have really boring songs compared to Common Starlings. Common Starlings are, well, common. They’re everywhere. They don’t seem all that special at first and no one ever notices them because they’re these really dull feathered, mostly brown, little birds that are so small and so well camouflaged that they blend into the trees and surrounding foliage to the point that they’re almost invisible. The thing is that, as easy as it would be to dismiss this tiny little bird for being dull and plain looking, they’re smart; incredibly smart. They can mimic just about any songbird’s song, car alarms, they can even learn tunes from the radio or copy human speech. Mozart even had a pet starling that learned his Piano Concerto in G Major and he composed a piece called ‘A Musical Joke’ based on one of its songs after it died.”

Felicity frowned in confusion, “That’s cool but what’s your point?”
“My point is that the little brown starlings might not be as brassy, or bold, or as exciting as the other birds, but when they choose to open their mouths and sing they become something absolutely incredible and utterly inspiring,” she told her. “Felicity, sometimes I think you spend too much of your time hiding and not enough time singing. You put up walls and melt into the background but when you open up and let us see you, it brings the light back into the room.” She reached out and cupped her cheek lovingly, “You need to sing, Cutie. Stop hiding and just start singing.” She bent towards her and kissed her on the lips softly. It wasn’t inappropriate in any way, other than the fact that it was still a kiss, but it seemed to be meant as more of a benediction than a vehicle of arousal.

Sara looked at her and smiled again, “I love you, little bird. Be safe and I’ll be back soon, okay?”

The two women embraced and then parted. Felicity watched as Sara made her way up the walkway then remained until the doors closed and the plane took off down the runway and up into the sky until it disappeared from sight.
Chapter Thirty-Five

Dig waited on the private tarmac and watched with a bright grin as a strikingly beautiful woman emerged from the plane in an elaborate electric wheelchair and drove down the specially designed ramp, her deep auburn hair catching the last of the sun’s rays. She was followed immediately by two men; a dark haired Caucasian man in his early twenties, and another man of mixed race who was taller and quite a bit broader in the chest. He recognized the dark haired kid as Tim Drake-Wayne, Batman’s son, but the other guy he’d never seen before.

“Mr. Diggle, I presume,” Barbara smiled engagingly as she drove her wheelchair towards him until they were facing one another.

“Ms. Gordon,” he said with a slight bow and a toothy grin. “You’re even more beautiful in person.

“Flattery will get you everywhere, I assure you,” she said returning his flirt with one of her own. Her companions joined her at the base of the ramp and she turned to introduce both of them, “Dig; I can call you Dig, right?”

He flashed her another grin, “I believe we had this discussion the other day.”

To his delight she blushed at the reminder of their extended conversation via Watchtower where he told her she could call him whatever she wanted as long as she did it frequently.

The dark haired young man shook his head and groaned under his breath, “I swear to God, I’m stuck in a frigging Super Hero Soap Opera. Every damn place I go…”

Barbara shot her young charge a quelling look and cleared her throat, “Dig, this is Timothy Drake-Wayne and Luke Fox. Guys, this is John Diggle.”

“Fox,” Dig said in surprise then looked at Luke closely. “You’re Felicity’s brother?”
“Sure am,” he said and extended his hand towards the older man. “Baby talks about you all the time. Nice to finally put a face to the name.”

“Baby?” Dig asked in confusion.

“Felicity’s nickname,” Tim explained as he shook his hand as well. “She’s said a lot of good things about you. In fact, I believe her words were ‘be nice to Dig or I’ll kill you.’”

“Yeah, well, that’s my girl.” Dig chuckled slightly, “Baby, huh? I guess I just never thought of Felicity as having a nickname for some reason. I think if I ever tried to ‘Baby’ her she’d probably kick my ass.”

“Yeah, she mentioned she always had to kick butt and take names to get the team going in the right direction. The impression I got was that it wasn’t always easy keeping you guys in line,” Barbara said with a smirk. “I suppose that after having her act as your drill sergeant and den mother for all these years it would be weird hearing someone call that little pistol ‘Baby’.”

“To say the least,” he said good naturedly. “Okay then, now that introductions are out of the way, do you guys want to see where you’ll be staying while you’re here or do you want to just go straight to the club?” He asked then turned to Luke, “Sorry man, we didn’t know you were coming but maybe you can bunk with one of your friends until we get you a place of your own or we can put you up at one of the corporate digs. I’d be happy to drop you off before I take your friends to where they need to go.”

“No problem,” Luke said easily as he adjusted the strap on his duffle bag. “I’m just here for a couple of days and then I’m heading back. No need to go out of your way or anything either, I’ll just hang out with my friends until I get to meet this ‘Oliver’ guy for myself,” he said, his tawny eyes glittering dangerously. “I would have thought he’d be here.”

“Uh no,” Dig said as he eyed the younger man warily. He recognized the stance of a fellow warrior and the way he’d said Oliver’s name did not bode well. “He’s at the office but he should be at the club when we get there.”

“You keep saying ‘the club’ but I thought you guys called your HQ the ‘Lair’?” Luke asked in confusion. “That’s where Felicity said she set up her Watchtower.”

Dig looked at him in surprise, “You…?” He turned to Barbara for confirmation.

She smirked, “Hey Luke, I think Mr. Diggle is asking if you’re aware of the fact that you’re in the company of several dangerous vigilante types of the Bat and Arrow variety.”

“Yeah, I think I might have a rough idea,” Luke said dryly. “So you were saying about Watchtower?”

“Uh, yeah, only we don’t have anything called ‘Watchtower’. Felicity just calls her workstation setup ‘the Lair console’,” Dig said slowly as he looked the newcomer up and down again but with new eyes.

“Lair or LAIR?” Barbara and Tim asked simultaneously.

Dig’s eyebrows drew together in surprise, “Wayne asked us the same thing when he was here but I still don’t understand what you guys are talking about.”

Tim and Barbara looked at each other knowingly.
“She wasn’t kidding when she said that before she joined up with these guys they were running searches off a computer from Walmart, was she?” Tim asked dubiously.

Barbara shook her head, “Oh my stars and garters, do I have a challenge in front of me or what?”

“In our defense, Felicity has us pretty well trained at this point,” Dig said apologetically. “We just stand back and do what she says while she does her thing.”

“I like a man who knows his place,” Barbara said with another smirk. “Okay, where’s our ride? I want to check out my girl’s setup for myself.”

“I knew you had the chair so I didn’t want to take the limo and I thought you guys could use a ride of your own, so Oliver arranged for a handicap accessible van.” He told them as he hit the key fob and the doors slid open on a customized black Mercedes-Benz Diesel Sprinter conversion mobility van. A mobility lift extended down automatically for Barbara to drive up on. “The driver’s seat comes out if you want to anchor your wheelchair in that spot instead of parking it in the back and it comes equipped with hand controls plus it gets really decent mileage which is always an added bonus.” He turned to Tim, “We figured you’d want a ride of your own so we leased you a company car and left it parked at your place.”

“Nice,” Barbara said with a grin as she admired her new ride. “Keep this up, John Diggle, and I just might have to keep you.”

“I aim to please,” he replied smoothly. “Do you guys have any luggage you want loaded up?”

Tim hitched his thumb towards the ground crew. “No, Bruce made sure Wayne Shipping would deliver our stuff and Barbara’s equipment to the addresses Queen sent him. We’ll be fine.”

“Some of the stuff we brought goes in the, uh, Lair,” Barbara smirked. “God, I love saying that,” she grinned. “Anyway, I figured that since Baby is going to be upgrading Watchtower that I would fix you guys up in exchange.”

“Thanks,” Dig said sincerely. “It’s been rough without Felicity here and we can use all the help we can get.” He looked over towards the ground crew who were unloading bags and equipment into separate vans. “I’ll let Thea know we’re expecting some deliveries so she can sign for them in case we’re out patrolling later.”


“Always,” he said, hefting his large duffel bag.

“You’re a…” Dig let his voice trail off but the meaning was clear.


“Unbelievable,” Dig said shaking his head. “Not only did Felicity work with Batman but her brother’s a mask, too? I swear that girl…”

“To be fair Felicity didn’t even know until recently,” Luke said wryly.

“She didn’t even know after he told her,” Tim muttered then smirked as Luke shot him a dirty look.

“Well, that’s something at least,” Dig said, seeing their byplay and filing it away for later. “What’s your handle, by the way?”
“Batwing.”

Dig looked at him for a long moment, “Batwing.”

“Here it comes,” Tim snorted. “It’s okay if you haven’t heard of him, no one else has.”


“I thought so,” Tim agreed.

“Batwing; as in the Batman of Africa?” Dig said in surprise. “Damn man,” he said extending his hand again. “I’m a big admirer of what you’ve been doing down there. I really appreciate you taking the time to give us a hand, especially since you’ve got your hands full with stopping the mining of blood diamonds down there along with fighting the Marabunta.”

Luke took his hand in a warm clasp again and shot Tim a triumphant look before addressing Dig. “I don’t know how much help I’ll be, I’m only here for a day or so, but I’ll pitch in where I can. Felicity mentioned you were Special Forces and you seem pretty current on the local wildlife so I take it then that you were in the DRC on business and not as a tourist?”

“You could say that,” he agreed. “I got sent in for a mission down there when I was with the Rangers and ran into some of your little Warlord buddies,” he told him. “Beautiful country but a rough place to work; going back to Afghanistan almost seemed like a cakewalk afterwards.”

“It can get tough,” he agreed. “If you’re ever down that way again, feel free to look me up. According to Baby, you’d be a good man to have on my side.”

“Oliver and I have enough on our hands for the moment, but thanks.” Dig grinned. “Damn, Felicity’s brother is Batwing. Oliver’s going to love this.”

“Cool! Glad you guys are bonding but it’s time to get this show on the road,” Barbara said clapping her hands together then headed towards the van, “Load up boys! I’m driving.”

“In that case,” Dig handed her the keys and walked alongside her chair. “Let me help you get the driver’s seat stowed away and show you how to anchor the chair.”

“Dude, does Barbara even have a license?” Luke asked quietly, leaning towards Tim.

“I don’t know,” Tim said with no small amount of trepidation. “I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?”

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Oliver turned towards the sound of the freight elevator as it rumbled to a stop and the doors opened. He and Dig hadn’t been able to hire anyone to check out the mechanism out but it seemed to be working fine for the time being despite being loud and somewhat temperamental. He turned and faced the group exiting the elevator then frowned as someone unexpected stepped off.

“That trip down the elevator was almost as dangerous as the ride over here was,” Luke said as he glared at it.

“So fix it, Mr. Engineer,” Barbara said snappily. “And no criticizing my driving. I drive fine; it’s everyone else on the road that can’t drive. Everyone knows that it’s just common courtesy to drive a minimum of five to ten miles above the speed limit; it’s called keeping up with the flow of traffic. And what the hell is with all those people stopping at the yellow lights? You don’t stop at the yellow; you go faster to avoid the red! Idiots.”
“I think that answers the question of whether or not Barbara has a license,” Tim said dryly as he stepped into the Lair.

“Not to mention road rage,” Luke agreed.

“Watch it,” Barbara said without heat. “I can’t help it if these West Coasters can’t drive for shit. Sunshine and avocados apparently turn people into morons. Try driving like that in Gotham and you’ll get a foot up your ass.”

“I can’t believe you actually gave a nun the finger,” Luke said shaking his head.

“Bitch was hogging the road,” Barbara grumbled.

Luke stopped in his tracks and turned to her, ‘You leaned out of the window and shouted ‘Be the Bride of Christ on your own fuckin’ time and get that piece of shit Jesus Freak bus out of my way.’”

“She moved, didn’t she?” Barbara said, shooting him a look.

“And then when the nun flipped her back? Dude, seriously, that was just wrong,” Tim said with a chuckle. He held out his phone, “Look; I uploaded it to YouTube.”

Dig shook his head and looked down at Barbara with a bemused expression on his face, “Has anyone ever told you that for such a beautiful woman you have quite a mouth on you?”

“Yes,” Barbara said with a naughty twinkle. “But probably not in the same context you’re thinking of.”

“Good to know,” Diggle said, rocking back on his heels.

“Man, I already have like a thousand hits! Sister Mary Middle Finger is going to have a lot of explaining to do once this thing starts trending. Talk about giving someone the bible bird,” He chuckled again and looked up. “Barbara, exactly how many tickets has your dad fixed for you through the years?”

“Not nearly enough,” she told him.

“Or too many, depending on your point of view,” Luke mumbled.

Barbara ignored him, still speaking to Tim, “Why do you think I had to resort to hacking? I’ll be damned if I was going to waste my time going to Traffic Court for every little thing. Hey, I missed a lot more stuff than I hit and besides, those big blue mailbox things are a menace just sitting out on the side of the road like that.” She snorted, “No wonder the Postal Service is going belly up.”

As they approached, Dig caught the look on his partner’s face and hurried to explain, “Oliver, this is-”

“You’re Felicity’s brother, Luke. The schoolteacher from Africa,” he looked from the man in question to Dig. “Why is he here?”

Luke put down his duffle bag and stepped up to the other man, giving him a cool smile, “You must be Queen.”

“Oh, this isn’t going to end well. I suggest you stay out of range; Luke has quite a reach on him,” Tim told Diggle with quiet eagerness as he moved toward the two men but slightly off to the side to avoid any stray blows.
“Great,” Dig muttered but didn’t make a move to stop him.

“Yeah,” Oliver said, eyeing him warily. He extended his hand toward him, “Call me Oliver. Felicity told me about the work you’ve been doing in the Congo.”

Luke eyed his hand but didn’t move to accept it. “Yeah, she told me about the work you guys do here as well,” he said in a low, dangerous timbre. “What exactly did Baby tell you I did in Africa?”

Oliver dropped his hand and shifted his stance as he dropped his friendly demeanor. “She said you ran a Foundation and that you worked with kids but since you’re here and you’re with two of Batman’s associates I’m assuming there’s more to the story than she shared with us.”

“Probably,” Luke said slowly as he pinned the other man with a hard stare.

“If you want to defend your little sister’s honor then take it to the mats, Batwing,” Barbara called out over her shoulder as she checked out Felicity’s setup with Diggle who was watching them intently but keeping his distance for the moment. “I’m not in the mood to be mopping up blood and picking little pieces of bone out of my new sandbox. Fuck with my Feng Shui and it’s your ass, got it?”


“Batwing?” Oliver said looking at him askance.

“That’s right,” Luke told him, his stance stiff and foreboding.


Dig cleared his throat, “He’s Batwing,” he said pointing to Luke. “You know, the Batman of Africa.”


Tim started sniggering even louder causing Luke to break his gaze in order to turn to him with a grimace, “Dude, do you mind?”

Diggle shifted his stance uncomfortably, “Batwing is Batman’s counterpart in Africa. He deals mostly with protecting the locals from invading warlords and battling human trafficking down there.” He stepped forward and said in a lower tone, “He’s one of the good guys, Oliver; plus he’s Felicity’s brother.”

Oliver tensed, his warrior instincts battling with the knowledge of how Felicity would react if he got into a brawl with her brother, before relaxing his stance and giving him a look of wary respect, “I apologize for not recognizing your handle. Felicity mentioned you worked with former-child soldiers but she didn’t tell us her brother was a vigilante as well.” He grimaced, “She didn’t share a lot of things with us apparently.”

“She didn’t know,” Dig interjected before Luke could say anything and he quickly added, “I said the same thing when I found out and they said she didn’t know about him being Batwing until recently.”

“That’s true,” Tim said with a grin. “Then again, it’s ‘Batwing’. Now Batman, Red Robin, Nightwing; those are names people recognize, but—”

“Am I wrong?” Tim shot back.

“Yes,” he told him. “Diggle—”

“Yeah, the one black guy in this whole outfit knew who you were,” Tim snorted then held up his hands in supplication as both Luke and Dig shot him a hard look. “Hey, just saying.”


“Yeah?”

“Shut it.”

“Shutting it now.”

Luke stepped up to Oliver, aggression evident in the line of his heavily muscled physique as he eyed him up and down. “Who I am and what I do doesn’t matter. The only thing you need to be concerned with right now is that fact that Felicity is my little sister and as far as I’m concerned you and I need to have a conversation about just what it is she’s been doing for the last four years since she left home.”

“You’re fucking with my Zen, Luke,” Barbara said waringly as she continued to tap on the keyboard in front of the workstation.

“Mats; got it,” Luke said without taking his eyes off of Oliver as he clenched his hand into a fist at his side.

Oliver stepped up to him, completely unintimidated as he sized his opponent up and down. “Your sister has been instrumental in keeping this city and the people in it safe. She’s proud of the work we’ve done and we’ve been lucky to have her on our side. She’s saved all of our lives on more than one occasion and, while I might not have always been successful in keeping her safe, I’ve always tried to keep her out of the line of fire whenever possible. I consider Felicity to be one of only two people I trust more than anyone else in the entire world and I would never do anything to hurt her.”


“Then you heard wrong,” he told him, the Arrow’s voice coming to the forefront. “I care deeply for your sister, but if you want to take this to the mats we can. However, I’m warning you right now that I won’t pull my punches just because you’re her brother.”

“Did you care about her when you slept with her then dumped her as soon as you pulled your pants back up?” Luke asked him, his own voice dropping into a deep rumble. “Because she was crying so hard the morning you left her that Tim here had to call me to tell me what happened. She was so upset in fact, that I hopped the first flight out and flew over sixty-four hundred miles to get to her only to find out, not only did you and Bruce take turns breaking her heart, but he left her covered in bruises like some goddamn punching bag! And then, when I finally got her calmed down enough that she could speak, she told us that, in addition to you using her, you had her dismantling bombs, jumping out of buildings, and being shot at for the last four years; care to explain that seeing as you care for her so deeply and all?”

Oliver flinched at the realization that Felicity had been so broken by what had happened and his face darkened in a mixture of anguish and anger, “Like you said; the bruises were courtesy of your friend, Wayne, and I settled my own objections over that by giving him a few bruises of his own. As for the
rest of it,” he took a breath and cast his eyes downward for a moment. “I didn’t use your sister for sex. Whether you choose to believe me or not, I care for Felicity more than you can ever know. Breaking her heart was never my intention. If you need to take a shot at me over it then I understand, I won’t even fight back,” he added quietly, “but just know that sending her away was probably the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my entire life. That said, it was the right choice, the only choice, I could make at the time. If I had to do it again, if in order to save her life I had to hurt her, I would. In a heartbeat. Take from that what you will; like I said, I won’t stop you.”

Luke looked at him steadily for a long moment, absorbing his words, before relaxing his stance, “Fine, I believe you,” he said at last. “Just be glad you said the right thing because if I thought for one minute you were lying or that you had taken advantage of Felicity then I would have kicked your ass.”

Oliver eyed him for a moment before relaxing as well. “Understood, I have a sister of my own, so I get it. Are we good?”

“We’re good,” Luke said holding out his hand in a gesture of peace which Oliver readily accepted. “For the record I did kick Bruce’s ass about two minutes after I saw Baby’s shoulder so at least we have that in common.”

Dig laughed, “You kicked Batman’s ass?”

Tim cleared his throat, “Well, I wouldn’t say you kicked his ass,” he said slowly. “More like you were in the middle of potentially kicking his ass before Felicity stepped in and nearly ripped both of you a new one.”

“I kicked his ass,” Luke said confidently. “Plus I still had the pins in my arm so I kicked his ass with basically one hand tied behind my back,” he said lifting the temporary brace on his wrist in emphasis. “No one messes with my baby sister and gets away with it. He’s just lucky she accepted his apology otherwise I would have put him through the friggin’ wall.”

“I kind of wish I had been there for that,” Oliver said grimly. “Like I said, Wayne and I got into a scrap as well. He’s a tough son of a bitch, that’s for sure.”

“I heard about that,” Luke said with a slight upturn of his lips. “Before you said anything, that is. Felicity is still kind of pissed at both of you for that, by the way.”

Oliver winced, “She told you…?”

“About how you and Bruce destroyed her house and practically everything she owned?” He asked off-handedly.

“Of course, she did steal Bruce’s wallet during your little scuffle. Just be glad she didn’t get ahold of your credit card, too,” Tim snorted as he leaned against the workstation with an air of casual indifference. “The only thing better than watching Luke deck Bruce followed by Felicity completely decimating him afterwards was finding how much she spent during her revenge shopping spree.”

Oliver turned his attention to the other man who was leaning against the workstation, arms crossed over his chest in a deceptively casual pose, “Yeah, I was there. He’s just lucky she didn’t decide to empty his bank accounts. I’m still kind of worried that my credit rating is going to take a sudden unexplained dive at any moment.”

“Yeah, Baby’s a pistol, all right. The Fox sisters are nothing if not creative in their revenge. By the way, I’m Tim; son of the tough son of a bitch in question,” he said giving him a brief wave, his dark
blue eyes hard and uncompromising despite his relaxed pose. “Not that I’m defending what he did; I was standing on the sidelines ready to take over for Luke just in case he needed back-up during the whole one-handed ass kicking.” He smiled toothily, his eyes glittering dangerously, “Just so you know, Baby is probably my favorite person in the entire universe next to her sister and Barbara, and the closest thing I have to a little sister of my own. If Luke hadn’t won the coin flip on the plane ride over here, it might have been me doing the threatening just now and, just so you know, I’m not nearly as laid back as I appear to be. Plus,” he uncrossed his arms and waved both hands, “I’ve got both arms and nothing holding me back except the desire not to piss off Oracle.”

“And believe me when I say that it is appreciated,” Barbara said distractedly as she kept her eyes glued to the monitors. “Blood stains are a bitch to get out and this is a new outfit.”

“Good to know,” Oliver said guardedly. He turned from one man to the other, “Are we still good or do we still need to move this to the other side of the room?”

Luke waved him off, “Like I said man, we’re cool. I can’t speak for my boy over there but, as far as I’m concerned, Felicity forgave you and if she doesn’t have a problem with you then neither do I. Speaking of Bruce though, he did want me to give you a message.”

“What is it?” Oliver said carefully.

“This,” He said then clocked him with a strong left hook that sent him sprawling onto the floor.

“Hey!” Barbara called out from across the room as she and Diggle both turned to watch the action. “The mats are over there damn it!”

“We’re cool,” Luke told her with a smirk. “Bruce just sent the one message; I promise.”

“Good, because the next message will be attached to my foot and delivered up your ass!” Barbara told him with a scowl.

“God, I love this kind of human interaction, don’t you?” Tim asked, the grin on his face never wavering as he turned to Diggle.

“It has its moments,” Diggle agreed with a note of resignation.

Oliver grimaced and wiped the blood from his mouth before he got to his feet and faced him again, “That was from Wayne, huh? And what did he say it was for specifically?”

“He mentioned that when my sister apparently took a bullet to the shoulder that you fixed her up in your lovely basement instead of taking her to the hospital and calling her family to let them know she was hurt,” Luke said, his lips twitching upward into a smile. “He also wanted me to tell you that he was just sorry he couldn’t deliver it in person.”

“Fair enough,” Oliver said. “Any other messages from friends or family members I should be on the lookout for or are we really done this time?”

“Like I said, we’re cool,” Luke said lightly. “Tim, you got any messages for Oliver here?”

“Nope,” Tim said shaking his head. “I was going to take a shot but you summed it up pretty nicely so I’m good.”

“See?” Luke grinned. “Besides, if I was really pissed I wouldn’t have held back the way I did.”

“That was holding back?” Oliver asked, rubbing his jaw.
“See this?” He said holding up his temporary brace. “I got it fighting an alien irradiated lion centaur; I was holding back, trust me.”

“I’m so sick of hearing about the freaky lion-dude,” Tim snorted. “Hey, I took on an entire army of assassins single-handedly and won yet you don’t hear me still bragging about it.”

“Dude, lion centaur,” Luke said as he turned to him with a superior air.

“One lion centaur versus at least a dozen trained assassins,” he reminded him. “Meanwhile Ra’s al Ghul looked me right in the eye afterwards and had no choice but to give me mad props while your guy had to go use a big litter box.”

“You went up against Ra’s al Ghul?” Dig asked, looking somewhat impressed.

“Sure did,” Tim grinned.

“Right before he tossed your sorry ass out of a window,” the other man added.

“And yet, not a scratch on me,” Tim said holding out his arms with a triumphant grin. “You’re just jealous because your biggest fight was against a dude who can be easily distracted by a piece of yarn.”

“Whatever,” Luke said rolling his eyes. He clapped Oliver on the shoulder in a friendly manner, “Seriously man, we’re cool. You can relax; we’re done.”

He nodded, still rubbing his quickly swelling jaw. “I guess I should just be grateful Felicity has people that care enough about her to fly three thousand miles just to punch me in the mouth,” Oliver said at last.

“Hey, I flew over six thousand miles to deck Bruce; what’s another three thousand or so?” Luke said with a shrug.

Tim wandered over and gave Oliver another easy going smile, “Just so you know, we’re good, too. Of course, if Baby changes her mind and decides to be mad at you again or if Tam tells me to kick the living shit out of you then I’ll have no choice but to beat you into a puddle of bloody goo.”

“Good to know,” Oliver said evenly.

“If you boys are done playing you might want to come over here and check out what Baby’s been doing with all of her free time,” Barbara called out and the two men turned and headed towards the console.

Oliver rubbed his jaw ruefully as he and Dig exchanged looks before joining their new companions at the workstation.

“Holy shit, Baby really did it, didn’t she?” Luke said with a wide smile as he leaned over and looked down at the code scrolling across Barbara’s screen.

“Damn, that’s beautiful,” Tim breathed as he looked at it. “You know what this means right?”

“Oh yeah,” Barbara looked at both of them. “Let’s hope Baby gets over being pissed at Bruce long enough to upgrade the Watchtower setup in the Batcave and in the clock tower.” She shook her head as she marveled at the coding in front of her then tapped a few keys, “Would you look at that? Oh, I am in love.”
“What are you guys looking at?” Dig asked in confusion.

Three sets of eyes swiveled in his direction as Tim pointed at the setup, “Dude, this is an actual working LAIR system.”

“Yeah, we know that,” Dig said with a frown.

Tim shook his head, “No, this is a LAIR—”

“Forget it, man,” Luke said cutting him off then turned to the other two men with a lopsided grin. “Have you guys ever heard of AI programming?”

“Artificial Intelligence?” Dig said tentatively. “Like in science fiction?”

“It’s not science fiction,” Barbara said as she turned her chair towards them. “Artificial Intelligence is real science and computer programmers have been trying for years to develop true AI programming. In fact, MIT, OSU, and several other cutting edge Computer Science and Robotics labs have been studying AI research since the 1970’s. LAIR traditionally stands for Laboratory for Artificial Intelligence Research.”

Luke saw the confusion in both men’s expressions and sighed, “When Baby was at MIT she worked on the LAIR project. In fact, she was a true prodigy. She started off as this spindly legged thirteen year old genius who could run circles around some of the most brilliant minds in the country and, by the time she was eighteen, she was published and defending her doctorate. In her thesis she posited that she could build and develop a coding language for a supercomputer that, while using a type of AI programming, could not only hack and decrypt virtually any system but could be condensed into a mobile app. Not only that, but it could ‘think ahead’ of the programmer and ‘learn’ pattern recognition so it could predict events and track them in real time.”

“What he means is that Felicity basically reinvented the wheel by creating a ‘smart’ computer that was essentially a vigilante in a can,” Tim said, then shrugged, “Or, in this case, a smart phone, tablet, or any other handheld smart device.”

“She called it List processor Autonomic programming within an Interleaved memory Rulebend system,” Luke added.

“And that means?” Oliver said slowly.

“It’s a bullshit name,” Barbara said with a smirk. “She was just trying to fuck around with the whole LAIR thing but the theories behind it were an evolutionary leap in cryptography and computer programming.”

“If she could prove it,” Luke added. “It got her a PhD and an article in Scientific American but writing about it and putting it into practice are two different things.”

“Wait, you mean the stuff she does with her tablet and her phone?” Diggle asked with a frown.

Barbara grinned, “Look, according to most mainstream programmers out there, the ‘stuff’ Felicity does with her tablet and her phone is technically impossible.”

“No more like beyond the scope of current technology;” Luke corrected.

“But Felicity does stuff with just her phone or her tablet all the time,” Dig said with a frown. “Most of the time she works from the Lair but I’ve seen her hack into computer networks and keypads with just her phone a million times.”
“Which is impossible,” Barbara said with an amused look. “Or should be impossible. It’s the kind of thing people show on TV or in the movies but that has no basis in reality. We already knew she was on the right path back when she helped program Watchtower, but this is…” Barbara gave a low whistle as she turned back to the monitor for a second.

“So what are you saying?” Oliver asked again.

“Come on Queen, you own a tech company,” Barbara snorted.

“Just because I own it doesn’t mean I know how everything we produce works,” he told her blithely.

“At least he’s honest,” Barbara said turning to her companions.

He sighed at her faint praise and ran his hand through his short hair, “Okay, here’s what I do know: We ran into a programmer who called himself the Clock King a few years ago,” Oliver said slowly. “He’s the guy responsible for the bullet to the shoulder, by the way. Felicity stopped him with a computer virus that sent a massive power surge to his phone causing it to overload and electrocute him, knocking him unconscious.”

“I love it,” Tim chuckled and shook his head ruefully. “Cellphone Taser; if that doesn’t scream Felicity I don’t know what does.” He and his two companions all exchanged amused looks.

Oliver couldn’t help but twitch his lips at that as well, “He came up with a program he called ‘the Skeleton Key’ that could hack virtually any lock. Felicity was pretty excited about it and spent every spare second she could taking it apart and studying it. I remember the day she finally figured it out and began making upgrades to our system but she never explained what she was doing exactly. We’d…well; we were forced to rebuild the Lair for the second time in a year, so she had to replace everything anyway. All I know is that as she rebuilt the system she started adding monitors and her hacks got a lot faster and more efficient.”

“I’ll say,” Barbara muttered as she turned to tap a few keys, “Look at this baby go!”

Luke gestured to his companions, “What Barbara and Tim are trying to say, is that if Baby ever showed this to the world, she’d probably wind up with a Nobel Prize,” Luke said as he peeked over Barbara’s shoulder again. “She took Watchtower and combined it with this Clock guy’s skeleton key and her own research into mobile application technology and created LAIR. This is her vindication and proof that her theories were correct.”

“A Nobel Prize?” Dig asked as he gave the familiar workstation a second look. “Really?”

“She could write her own ticket,” Barbara told him. “She’d be on the cover of every major scientific publication, not to mention Time, Newsweek…”

“That or she’d wind up chained to the wall in some underground NSA super-max prison,” Tim said with a snort. He looked at the two of them, “You guys really didn’t know how big a deal this was? Felicity never explained it to you? I mean, seriously, this setup is the Holy Grail for computer geeks. I can’t believe she didn’t tell us about this,” Tim said in amazement. “How could she just…I mean, she didn’t say a word to anyone. If I had programmed something like this I’d be crowing from the rooftops about it.”

“I can,” Barbara said still tapping away at the keyboard. “If she told us about LAIR then Bruce would have immediately come down here to secure the technology for our mission.” She smiled mischievously, “I can’t wait to see his face when she springs this on him.”

“Well, we knew she was smart but…” Dig said faintly. “Nobel prize, huh?” He turned to smirk at his
partner, “And you had her getting coffee and doing your schedule for the last three years. You deserved that punch big time.”

Guilt flooded Oliver’s expression as he rubbed his hand over his jaw again, “Yeah, probably more than just the one.”

“I’d hit you again but then I’d run the risk of pissing off Baby and then she’d sic Peggy Ann on me,” Luke said distractedly as he watched as Barbara raced through every CCTV camera in the city in a matter of seconds.

“Who’s Peggy Ann?” Dig asked and all three of them turned to him in surprise.

Tim gave him a skeptical look, “Peggy Ann; Peggy Ann Hu?” He looked at both of them then frowned when they didn’t react, “Felicity’s foster-grandmother, how do you guys not know that?”

“Who?” Diggle asked in consternation.

Tim shook his head, “No, Hu; H-U. She’s Chinese. She was Felicity’s grandparent’s friend and after they died she became her mom’s foster-mother. She came to live with Felicity’s parents after their dad married her mom and when Evie died she basically took over.”


“That she does,” Tim said slowly. “Hates me—like hate hates me. I honestly think your dad is more fond of me than she is.”

“And if you had any idea of how much dad doesn’t like Tim, you’d understand how serious that really is,” Luke snorted.

“Okay, hang on: Felicity’s dad is the CEO of Wayne Enterprises and black, her brother is Batwing, she used to work for Batman, and she has a Chinese grandmother?” Dig said slowly.

“Trust me, it gets worse,” Tim said easily. “Peggy Ann is a Kaifeng Jew and she brings new meaning to the term ‘yenta’. Plus, like I said, she hates me and I’m normally a very likeable guy.”

“You really are,” Luke said fondly.

Tim smiled at him, “Thanks bro.”

“No problem.”

“A Jewish Chinese foster-grandparent,” he turned to Oliver. “Did you know that?”

“No, but I did know about the Kaifeng Jew thing,” Oliver said schooling his features into an even expression. “After all, anyone can be Jewish; it’s not just an ethnic identity but a religious and cultural one that is inclusive to people of many races.”

“Seriously?” Diggle asked him incredulously.

“I’m not completely culturally ignorant you know,” Oliver said blithely. “My knowledge of the Jewish culture does extend beyond Seinfeld references and accountant jokes.”

Diggle merely shot him a look that told him he wasn’t buying it.

“So let me get this straight; you guys worked with Baby for nearly four years and you know absolutely nothing about her?” Luke asked eyeing both men curiously.
“No, of course not!” Dig turned to Oliver then back to the three strangers who were somehow more in tune with the space they had occupied for the last four years than they were. “We know stuff, right Oliver?” He said a bit obviously.

Oliver sighed and rubbed the back of his neck with a scowl, “I probably know a lot more about her background than Dig does, but most of what I know I found out either right before or right after she left. Felicity has always been very reticent about sharing any information about her past with us. The most she ever told us was that her biological father abandoned her and that she had some kind of issues concerning her mother but we didn’t even know both her biological parents were dead until after your father and Wayne came down here a few weeks ago. She said that she never told us about your dad because she didn’t want to risk the professional backlash or the even the appearance of some sort of conflict of interest. She also didn’t tell us about Wayne’s mission because she didn’t want to risk exposing his identity. What did she tell you about us?”

“Not much,” Luke admitted. “Then again Baby has always had a way of making it seem like she says a lot without saying anything at all.”

As soon as the words left Luke’s mouth, Oliver felt himself nodding to himself as he acknowledged the truth in those words. What did he know about Felicity really? Four years of ramblings ran through his brain, little snippets of information that he was surprised to find out that he had clung to. He knew she graduated from MIT but he didn’t know she was a prodigy or that she had a doctorate. He knew she was Jewish but he didn’t know about her unique family history. And then there was the time she said she dyed her hair and he assumed she was a brunette but…

And suddenly he was there again, laying between her thighs and seeing the sparse, almost nonexistent white-blonde curls, slick with dew, as he bent to taste her. Memories of her taste, the way her breathing sounded in the quiet of the room as he loved her, the sweet sounds that erupted from her as he entered her for the first time flooded his mind and he swallowed.

“Oliver, are you okay?” Diggle said, startling him from his reverie.

He looked up in confusion as he schooled his features into an expression of normalcy, “What?”

“I was just telling them some of the stuff Felicity would say mid-ramble,” he said, a bemused expression on his face.

“Yeah,” he said shaking off the odd mood that had caused his brain to short circuit. “I was just…thinking about something else, sorry.” He turned to the rest of his companions and gave them a forced smile, “Felicity…yeah, her rambles are pretty much the only thing that kept us going some days. That is, when she wasn’t screaming at me to get my head out of my ass.”

Diggle offered them a smile of his own, “I’ll say. She had a hell of a temper on her once you got her wound up! That girl could be scary when she wanted to. Hey, remember the thing with the Sewer King?” He asked, grinning at Oliver.

“The Sewer King?” Barbara said dubiously.

“That sounds…unpleasant,” Tim said with a disgusted expression.

“Oh, this I have to hear,” Luke snorted as he shook his head ruefully.

“What I want to know is how the hell did you get Baby anywhere near a guy calling himself the Sewer anything in the first place?” Barbara said with a grin.

“It’s a long story,” Oliver said ruefully.
“So what’s this Sewer King’s deal?” Tim asked.

He sighed, “The Sewer King was this modern day Fagin who used street kids as everything from pickpockets to drug runners in this ‘underworld empire’ he had built.”

“Real underworld empire,” Dig snorted.

“You’re saying this guy really lived in the sewer?” Tim asked in disbelief. “It’s not just some kind of really unfortunate nickname he picked up because he was into directing scat porn or used to collect Garbage Pail Kids trading cards?”

“Yep,” Diggle said with a mischievous grin. “He came by his handle honestly, although Felicity likes to refer to him as the ‘River of Poo Guy’ or just ‘Stinky’.”

“I don’t know whether to be pissed that you let my sister anywhere near that freak or impressed that you were able to convince her to go down there in the first place.” Luke said in amazement.

“Well, to be honest it wasn’t Oliver who got her involved in all of that,” Diggle told him, his dark eyes dancing with laughter.

“There is no way you’re ever going to convince me that going down into the sewers was my sister’s idea,” Luke told them flatly. “She throws away the plunger after using it one time because she has a thing about the ‘poo germs’ getting all over the floor.”

“Really?” Dig asked with a chuckle.

“Really,” Luke nodded. “Believe me; I shared an off-campus apartment with her that had lousy plumbing and toilets that were constantly overflowing. We went through at least six plungers a week and she used to buy bleach by the cart load. After a month of that she couldn’t take it anymore and made us move.”

“He’s right,” Tim said with a shrug. “Baby isn’t exactly a sewer type of girl.”

“It was actually my sister’s fault,” Oliver said with a grimace.

“Do tell, Sparky,” Barbara said, bringing her wheelchair in closer. “This story is starting to get interesting.

Oliver closed his eyes and sighed, “First off, you should know my sister, Thea, runs the club upstairs and is a member of our team, albeit not an active one at the moment. We already told her you guys were coming so you’ll meet her later. Anyway, she’s had some training and ever since she found out about my being the Arrow, she’s wanted to…”

“Make it a family business,” Dig finished for him with no small amount of delight.

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t help that her ex-boyfriend is always encouraging that sort of thing,” He said with an air of exasperation. “Thea, during the months she was gone, trained and operated as a mask under the handle ‘Artemis’, but I wouldn’t allow her to actively join our mission until I felt she was ready. She...didn’t agree with my decision.”

“So…” Tim said, drawing out his vowels.

Oliver made a disgruntled noise, “One day Thea was shopping and she happened to notice these kids behaving strangely so she decided to go on her own little ‘stake out’ by following and photographing these kids doing everything from picking pockets to running drugs.”
“Drug dealers use kids as runners all the time,” Tim said with a frown.

“And your point is?” Luke asked his friend, his ire apparent although it wasn’t directed at him as much as it was the situation itself.

Understandable, given that he worked with children who were taught to do a lot more than just lift wallets, Oliver thought.

“I’m just wondering why that would catch her attention,” Tim said. “Starling is a pretty big city and, no offense, but from what I read your sister wasn’t all that unfamiliar with scoring dope a few years back. What about the situation caught her attention?”

“Two things,” Diggle interjected, “the fact that the kids were so well trained and coordinated, and the ages of the kids. Most were young; very young. The oldest kid was barely eight years old and the youngest wasn’t even five.”

“That, and the fact that when she followed them ‘home’ they all went into the park and crawled into a concrete culvert only to disappear into a storm drain,” Oliver finished. “Although she had been pursuing it on her own, once she realized that kids were involved she decided to go for backup. She wasn’t afraid of the kids but she didn’t want any of them getting hurt and she’d never run her own op before.”

“So she went to Felicity with it?” Tim asked quizzically. “Why not you guys?”

Oliver’s mouth thinned into a tight grimace, “We had…come off a tough case and the rest of us weren’t really up for taking on any new missions at the time.”

“This was six months ago, wasn’t it?” Tim asked, his expression serious as he looked from one man to the other.

“Not quite, but close enough that most of us were still hobbling around on crutches,” Oliver said, his expression guarded. “Did she tell you about that case?”

Tim’s expression darkened, “Only that everyone on the team was pretty badly injured. We tried getting some of the details from her but she didn’t want to talk about it.”


“No,” Dig said quickly. His expression became a bit haunted, “No, she didn’t have so much as a scratch on her.” As Luke’s expression continued to darken, Diggle continued on with a slightly forced smile, “The point is that Thea went to her, not just because the rest of us were still looking all beat to hell and back, but because she knew Oliver would hit the roof if he found out what she’d done, Sara and I would have told Oliver, Lance would have gone all ‘fatherly protector’, and Roy would have had a complete meltdown at the thought of her risking her safety, so that left Felicity.”

“So why didn’t Felicity tell you guys and what did Thea say to get her to go down into the sewers?” Tim asked obviously sensing that they were as reluctant to talk about the source of their injuries as Felicity had been.

“I think that Felicity just figured Thea was seeing things that weren’t there and just wanted to keep her out of trouble,” Oliver said smoothly but that wasn’t it at all.

The real reason Felicity didn’t tell them was because, at the time, he was involved with Laurel again and the other woman had begun to display very aggressive and abusive behavior in her presence while managing to hide that side of herself from the rest of them for the most part. Still, it was
obvious that tensions were rising within the team but, rather than handle the situation, he’d chosen to ignore it figuring wrongly that it would resolve itself in time. It didn’t.

The one time she did try to approach him about the possibility that Laurel was spiraling he’d basically accused her of being jealous as he was in denial himself. Upset at his attitude, Felicity had begun to actively avoid him for a while and helping Thea gave her an excuse to stay out of the Lair.

He walked in to see Laurel staring daggers at Felicity whose cheeks were burning with either anger or embarrassment.

“Is there a problem here?” He asked, looking from one woman to the other.

“No problem,” Laurel said lightly, her face relaxing into an easygoing smile as she turned to greet him.

“Are you sure?” He was asking both of them but his eyes were locked on his tech as she swiveled away from him in her chair and began to tap on the keys to her workstation in silence.

“It was nothing,” Laurel said with a roll of her eyes. He voice dropped to a more confidential level, “I think we might have accidently embarrassed her when she caught us last night, that’s all. She was just apologizing again.”

He felt himself flush at that. The evening before Felicity had gone upstairs to help Thea with something. Even though Laurel knew she was coming right back down she’d basically jumped him. He’d protested but she began talking in low dirty tones, reminding him that they hadn’t made love in a couple of months, not since Merlyn had taken Connor in retaliation for Thea leaving him and returning home.

Not that it had been his fault that they hadn’t been intimate. Laurel, when she found out that he’d gotten Sandra pregnant while sleeping with both her and her sister, had broken up with him, not the other way around. She left him and the mantle of Canary behind to take up a solo mission as ‘Manhunter’ while he regrouped and tried to make amends to his remaining team members. Truthfully, if he was being honest, her absence came as something of a blessing as it gave him a chance to reconnect with Thea. He didn’t even have time to miss her between training his sister to eventually take over the spot she had vacated and dealing with the whole Cheshire debacle.

A few weeks later when Slade reentered their lives after escaping from ARGUS’s super-max, he’d gotten back with Sara for a brief period of time; very brief, but long enough to know that it was really over between them. After a heartfelt talk, Sara ended it in the hospital and told him that he needed to be with the woman he really loved once and for all.

Instead he did the next best thing and went back to Laurel.

Before he knew it her hand was down his pants, her fingers wrapped around him as she whispered deliciously filthy things in his ear like how the possibility of getting caught always used to be a turn on for him in the past. Like usual, he let himself be led by his dick and caved. Felicity walked in to find Laurel’s tongue down his throat, straddling his lap and grinding on him as they sat on the couch in the Lair, his hand up her blouse.

He heard her make a small strangled gasp as she stammered out a quick apology. He untangled himself from Laurel’s embrace just in time to see the expression on her face before she turned and practically ran back up the stairs. Mortification burned on her cheeks as her eyes filled with pain. It
tore at him and, for a second there, he’d almost felt as though he’d been caught cheating on her even though Laurel was supposed to be his girlfriend.

Unable to cope with the tangle of emotions he’d felt, he told Laurel that he needed to be somewhere and avoided her for the rest of the day.

“I don’t think Felicity is used to seeing that kind of thing,” she said to him in a near whisper. “She practically admitted to me that she’s never had a real boyfriend before. Plus, she still has a little bit of a crush on you so I think she’s taking our getting back together a little hard, if you know what I mean. I think after you broke up with Sara and Garret dumped her, she kind of got her hopes up.”

He glanced away, unable to speak.

“Look at you,” Laurel said with an amused purr in a voice that was unnecessarily loud. “You’d think Felicity’s shyness was contagious the way you’re blushing right now. Since when is Ollie Queen embarrassed about getting caught having sex?”

“Laurel…” he growled in a warning.

“Oh please!” She snorted, “She has eyes! She knows exactly what we were doing and she’s fine with it; aren’t you Felicity?” The last bit was spoken to the other woman’s turned back. She didn’t respond but Laurel chose to take her silence as such, “See?”

He cleared his throat, glancing down at his watch, “Weren’t you supposed to join your dad for dinner before going to your meeting?”

A look of annoyance crossed her face briefly before she smiled again, “I was just about to head out now. I don’t suppose you’d like to join us?”

“Not tonight,” he told her shortly, his irritation with her growing with every passing second.

“Okay, we’ll just meet up later,” she told him, seemingly oblivious to it. “Are you spending the night at my place again? We never did get to finish, remember?” Her voice lowered but he knew Felicity could still hear every word.

“Fine, I’ll see you later,” he told her quickly just to get her out of the foundry and away from him.

“See you,” she purred, kissing him softly before grabbing her bag and heading out. She paused near Felicity’s chair, “Bye Felicity.”

“Bye,” Felicity said shortly, her eyes never leaving the monitor.

“And, like I said earlier, you have nothing to apologize for,” she told her, looking over her shoulder towards him with a wink. “I’m just sorry if we made you uncomfortable.”

“I’m fine, thanks,” she said in a subdued tone.

He watched as Laurel practically skipped up the stairs, tossing one last flirtatious look over her shoulder before heading off to meet her dad. Taking a deep breath he leaned heavily on his crutches as he tried to think of what to say to his EA but words failed him.

“Oliver, can we talk?”

He looked up at Felicity who was speaking quietly, one eye on the retreating back of his girlfriend as the door shut behind her. “Yeah, sure; what is it?”
She bit her lip, “I think something’s going on with Laurel.”

“What do you mean?” He asked her, his muscles tensing.

“You haven’t noticed?” She said in a voice that was just north of a whisper.

“Noticed what?” He asked with an angry edge.

She hesitated for a second before speaking, “She’s behaving erratically, she’s becoming paranoid, aggressive—”

“Aggressive to whom?”

She met his perturbed gaze steadily, “To me, for one, and also to Thea.”

“Thea’s the one who keeps engaging her, not the other way around,” he said shortly. “What is it you’re trying to say?”

She looked down at her feet, “I think she…I think she might be using again.”

“She’s not,” he bit out, his own embarrassment and irritation causing his response to sound harsher than he had intended.

“Oliver…”

“I practically live with her, Felicity. She’s my girlfriend,” he told her. “I’d know if she were doing drugs.”

Her eyes skittered away from his as she wrung her hands nervously, “Maybe or maybe you’re just too close to see it.”

“Or maybe she’s not the one with the problem?” The minute he said it he wished he could take it back.

Her eyes snapped up as she looked at him incredulously, “What?”

“It’s not the first time you’ve been jealous over having another woman on the team,” he told her, trying to cover for his mistake as he attempted to rein in his temper. “You were jealous of Sara at first…”

“I was not jealous of Sara!” She said hotly.

“Felicity,” he said in a softer tone, “you went after Tockman and nearly got yourself killed when Sara first joined the team because you felt insecure about your place within the team. That and,” he gave her a sympathetic look, “well, Sara and I were involved and I think that was hard on you for a lot of reasons. Look, you and Sara became friends once you got over it; I know Laurel can be a bit difficult at times, but maybe if you try harder you’ll eventually learn to like her just as much as you like Sara.”

“You want me to try harder?” She said incredulously.

He sighed impatiently, the irritation he felt at Laurel’s antics earlier creeping back into his tone, “Laurel has been working with us for over a year now; she’s not going anywhere. You need to accept that and try to get along.”

“I’m not the one with the problem, Oliver; she is!” She flushed a deep red, “Okay, fine; back when
Sara first joined I admit that I felt a little insecure at first but I was never jealous of her! You make it sound like…”

“Like what?” He prompted.

She pressed her lips together angrily then got up from her chair to plant her finger in the center of his chest, “I am not jealous of Laurel!”

“Yes sure?” He asked her, his own anger bubbling forth.

“Why would I be jealous of her?” She demanded. “What is it you think she has that I would want?”

He took a deep breath and placed his hand on her shoulder tentatively, “Felicity, you know that I care for you as a friend—”

“Oh my God!” She said, pushing away from him, a livid expression on her face. “Why would you—I’m going home!” She said, snatching up her bag and heading for the door.

“Felicity,” he said, blocking her way. “I’m not trying to upset you but we never did talk about the thing with Slade. We hit on it a little but we never really discussed it.”

She froze, “What thing with Slade?”

“The first time,” he told her in a more subdued tone. “When I told you I--”

“Don’t!” She warned him.

“I’m not trying to embarrass you,” he told her.

“No, right now you’re embarrassing yourself!” She shot back. “That was my plan, remember? I’m the one who said you should take Slade’s attention away from Laurel by pretending that I was the one he should have targeted instead! I was trying to help you save her just like I am trying to do right now! You know what?” She said, shaking her head, “I don’t want to talk to you anymore tonight. Between that overinflated ego of yours and the fact that your head is perpetually stuck up your own ass, trying to talk sense into you is just a waste of time!” She stomped up the stairs, her face beet red and, although she tried to hide them, he could see the tears tracking down her cheeks as she slammed the foundry door behind her.

Rubbing his hand across his mouth he closed his eyes and cursed himself for causing her further pain. He knew she was right; Laurel had been acting erratically and he’d seen for himself how she’d been increasingly abusive towards Felicity but he hadn’t said anything because he knew something she didn’t.

If Laurel was suspicious of his feelings towards Felicity it was because she had every right to be.

Long after she stomped out of the Lair, he fought the urge to go after her and apologize. He couldn’t though and he wouldn’t. It was better if she stayed angry at him, at least until he got his head straight, because the whole time she was yelling at him all he could think about was how beautiful she looked when she was angry and how much he had wanted to kiss her.

It took them a while to get to a good place again after that. Even after Laurel moved to Central City to be near her mom after rehab, there was still a hint of hurt in her eyes whenever they were alone.
He hadn’t been lying when he told her that what happened between them in the conference room had been a long time coming. Seeing her anger that day, the tears coursing down her cheeks, the way she looked with her hair down around her shoulders and that damn dress clinging to every curve…

She was even more beautiful just a few days later when he woke her up after spending the entire night making love to her, her hair in tangles and her lips swollen from his kisses. It took everything he had not to crawl back into her bed and say to hell with it.

Instead, he broke her heart and sent her running into the arms of someone else….and it was all his fault for telling her to move on.

He resisted the urge to brood as he pretended to listen to Diggle’s story.

“…So I pick up my phone and it’s Felicity. I answer it thinking she’s calling to ask for our lunch order and she starts screaming about how alligators in the sewer weren’t an urban myth after all, poo pirates, and the fact that Thea now owes her a new pair of shoes!”

They all began to laugh like it was a big joke but it wasn’t. Dig could laugh about it now; hell, all of them thought it was hilarious *now*, but it wasn’t then. When he thought of the Sewer King he didn’t think about the funny bits or the relief he’d felt when he realized Thea and Felicity were safe, he thought about the parts of the story Diggle wasn’t telling.

Dig had called him in a panic and told him that Felicity and Thea were in trouble and he hadn’t hesitated. He’d still been on crutches, his arm in a sling and still practically useless, but he also knew he had no choice but to go down there after her—not just Thea, her.

It was later in the evening after their argument in the Lair. He’d been with Laurel; still upset at her earlier behavior but not upset enough to resist her as she sank to her knees in front of him. The phone rang just as she was telling him in a low purr that she wanted to suck him off and then she wanted him to fuck her like they’d started to in the foundry.

He should have known something was very wrong with Laurel then. While they’d always had a good sex life, she had never been into talking dirty before. She’d never liked using words like ‘fucking’ to describe the act for one; for her it was always ‘making love’. Suddenly though, she was sexting him, crawling all over him every chance she got, engaging in PDA, and acting unusually possessive. Later when he’d read up on her disease it all made sense (the aggression, erratic behavior, impulsiveness, her reckless risk-taking and dangerous behavior in the field, her willingness to blow off work, her sudden streak of uninhibited sexual behavior) but, at the time, he’d chalked it all up to what had happened with Slade; that she was still reeling from the fact that she’d almost lost her family again and that they deliberately cut her out of the loop for her own good. It wasn’t unusual for someone to use sex as stress relief or to reaffirm that they were still alive after a close call. The erratic behavior and sudden disinterest in her career could be explained away as well. She was just healing, that’s all he thought it was…at first. They were all still recovering, and not just from the physical scars his return had left behind.

She was starting to unzip his fly when he placed his hand over hers so he could grab the phone off the coffee table. She pouted angrily beside him as Dig told him what was going on. As soon as he hung up he tried to explain to her that he had to leave, that they (meaning Felicity and Thea) were in danger, she completely lost it. She accused him of cheating on her and that Dig was just covering for him, hurled insults at him about his inability to perform because she wasn’t some ‘pathetic little blonde virgin who fawned all over him’. It was at that moment he realized it was over. Unable to deal with her shit, he walked out without saying another word.

Whatever love he felt for Laurel, or thought he felt, began to die at that moment. It certainly died less
than twenty-four hours later when she confronted them at the club, obviously drunk and stoned, and hurled insult after insult at Felicity while he just stood there in shock and let it happen. Felicity’s eyes, normally so bright and animated, were almost dead as she stared at him, not even acknowledging Laurel’s insults, just him. She just stood there, Laurel spewing one filthy accusation after another in her face, staring into his soul and begging him silently to do something. He couldn’t though; it was like he was frozen in place. He couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, until Laurel rushed towards her with her hand raised in a slap and then he acted.

In a voice that was as cold and dead as his feelings for the woman whose arm he held, he asked Felicity to leave them. He couldn’t even bear to watch as she walked away because he knew what he’d see reflected in her eyes if he did. Even so, the pain and anger he knew she felt towards him was nothing compared to the self-loathing he had for himself. He knew why he froze up, why he couldn’t even bear to look at her for days afterwards. It was because when Laurel had walked into the room and saw his hand on her shoulder, saw him embrace her then apologize for their earlier argument…

…when he pulled away and looked down at her, that was the moment he decided to finally kiss her. He had nearly lost her again and he wanted to kiss her so he could prove to himself she was real and that she was safe. He wanted to take her in his arms and taste her so badly it hurt. Their eyes locked and his head dipped towards hers but then Laurel began to yell at them and he froze. That’s what Laurel saw even if Felicity didn’t. She saw the look on his face, the irrefutable proof in his expression that told her he had fallen in love with another woman.

He should have done like Dig had advised and apologized to her later but he didn’t. He could never bring himself to apologize to her because, as contrite as he felt over the whole situation with Laurel, he was also still angry with her and at himself. When he discovered she’d been taken by the Sewer King, it brought back memories of the night she almost died at her own hand.

For him.

She almost killed herself for him just like she almost got herself killed chasing after Thea into the goddamn sewer.

Dig and Lance could laugh about it but every time he pictured that day, every time he saw her, all he could think about was that explosive device in her pocket and how she’d reached for the detonator as Slade dragged her away. How she booby-trapped herself again in order to take him down; only this time it wasn’t a syringe filled with Mirakuru antiserum in her pocket, it was a fucking bomb.

From the first time he opened his eyes in the hospital to the moment he finally broke in the conference room, all he could think about was that he was going to lose her. All he could see was some madman’s gun in her side or Slade’s blade at her throat. There was no respite from his thoughts, not even when he slept. Every dream was filled with memories of hot July rain, the way her hair whipped around her head as she reached inside her pocket for that damn detonator, and the look in her eyes as she walked away with him.

In every single dream she was always walking away and he was always watching her go.

In response, he kept pushing her further away emotionally; struggling with the anger he felt towards her for nearly getting herself killed and the confusion over the feelings she inspired within him. It had been getting harder and harder to deny the attraction he’d felt for her when Garret blew into their lives but when Slade...

He swallowed, he knew he should have sent her away a long time ago but he couldn’t bring himself to release her; he was far too selfish for that. He needed her then and, God help him, part of him
always would.

As Diggle continued telling the story with animated gestures and a huge grin on his face, Oliver allowed his thoughts to return to that night; the night they confronted Slade and almost lost.

The night he almost lost her forever:

“*It’s my birthday.*”

“I know.”

“This was fun, kid, but it’s time to end it,” Slade said in an almost bored tone as he stood over him to deliver the coup de grace.

Oliver hung his head, ready for it. He was so tired, just so fucking tired. His team was either dead or dying. Roy had been beaten to the point that his face looked like chopped meat and his chest was still; if he wasn’t dead yet, he soon would be. Sara was unconscious and bleeding out. She’d come at him with deadly intent and accuracy but Slade had run her through with one of his blades without even sparing her a second glance. Dig was barely hanging on, his femur shattered by a bullet and two more in his chest, blood bubbling out of his mouth as he struggled to maintain consciousness. He’d be dead only minutes after Slade was done with him. As for his fate…

Oliver watched as Slade casually reached into the quiver of arrows that were lying in the dirt and mud. The belt had broken and he’d been disarmed of his weapons of choice after Slade had sliced him across the chest and through the thick military issue Kevlar vest he wore like it was nothing. He’d then tossed him a sword of his own just to stretch out the torture a bit longer. He was good with a sword, almost as good as he was with a bow, but Slade was better.

First he’d sliced into his right thigh, then left a nasty but relatively shallow cut on his left bicep, then he’d pierced his right shoulder. When the blade fell from his grip, Slade suspended the fight so that Oliver could pick it up and carry on left handed. He was bleeding fairly heavily by then and blood was running down that arm and making the hilt slick in his grip but it didn’t matter; a few seconds later he’d stabbed him through the thigh of his left leg, sending him to his knees. He then pieced his side, sending him to the ground, writing in pain. Even though Slade had strategically avoided any arteries, he was losing blood quickly. Already he could feel himself becoming light headed. He struggled to get back up and Slade pinned him to the ground like an insect to a collection board, his blade entering his left shoulder and digging deep into the ground before he pulled it out again.

From within a hidden pocket in his armor, Slade pulled out a pristine white handkerchief and wiped the blood from the steel then tossed it on Oliver’s bruised and battered body contemptuously before retrieving the fallen sword and sheathing both weapons behind his back.

Just before he reached for the arrow, he took off his mask and tossed it on the ground, then bent down with his head toward him so that Oliver had no choice but to look into the face of the man he once called ‘brother’, the man who’d killed his mother right in front of him, who’d kidnapped his sister, who’d terrorized them for years, and who was now about to kill him. He’d cast off his eye patch so Oliver could see the gruesome evidence of his betrayal all those years ago and offered him an almost pitying smile. “Goodbye, kid,” Slade said as he examined the arrow in his hands, twirling it a bit in his grip. “Believe it or not, I’m going to miss you.”

Time slowed, the air grew thick, and a weight seemed to lift from his chest as he calmly accepted that his journey had come to an end. As he waited for the final blow, a single thought came to him.
It wasn’t about his friends or his family, it wasn’t flashes of his life, it wasn’t regret or prayers to a god he didn’t believe in; it was of her.

Felicity.

She was safe, he thought. Slade couldn’t go after her now. By now ARGUS would have gotten in touch with her and Thea and Trevor’s assistant would have arranged for them to be taken into protective custody. This had always been about him and Slade; despite her being the one to dose him with the antiserum, Felicity was an innocent. She shouldn’t have to pay for his sins. Even if this was the end he knew he could die with the knowledge that Slade would never be able to touch her ever again.

He closed his eyes and remembered her smile, her scent, and the sweet sound of her voice one last time before facing his killer, and then...

Something happened; something he didn’t understand. Maybe it had been a trick of the light or blood loss, but one minute it was just him and Slade and the next thing he knew there she was, standing between them. It was as though his mind had summoned her forth so that she could whisk him into the afterlife.

That’s what he thought she was, at first; a hallucination. He was even grateful that his sanity had snapped so that his last moments could be with her before realizing that all was not right. If she was his hallucination then why did she have her back to him? He could see her features in profile, trace the curves of her face with his eyes, but her focus was completely on Slade instead of him. In his state of pain and blood loss he found himself more than a little put out about that. It was then that he caught the look of shock on the other man’s face and realized he could see her as well. In fact, the other man was so caught off guard by her presence that he actually fell back several steps to openly gape at her before regaining his composure.

“Hello, lovely one,” he greeted her with an almost questioning inflection as his one good eye locked on her form, “Where did you pop in from?”

As soon as the words left the other man’s mouth, Oliver reacted. He began screaming at her to run, get away, but she ignored him to the point that Oliver almost felt as though he were locked in a nightmare. It was as though neither of them could hear him.

It was as though their focus was completely on one another and the rest of the world had faded away. Including him.

Especially him.

“It’s been a while hasn’t it?” He asked her.

“A little over a year, almost a year and a half, since you kidnapped me,” she said.

“Kidnapped is such an ugly word for it, darling. I thought you enjoyed our little talk that night; I know I did. I’ve replayed it in my mind a thousand times since then,” his eye traced her features. “Couldn’t stay away, could you? Did you miss me? I know I’ve missed you.”

“It’s my birthday,” she said, apropos to nothing, her tone calm and composed as she looked up into the face of the man whose name had become synonymous with their deaths.

“I know,” he said quietly, his one good eye still trained on her, his voice equally measured and calm. He reached behind his back and drew one of his swords, the slick sound of metal against metal causing bile to rise in his throat. Oliver continued to scream as he struggled to drag himself over to
them but it was useless. He made a show of checking his wrist which was absent of any sort of
timepiece mockingly, “But wait, not quite midnight yet though, love. We still have a few minutes
until your birthday proper.”

“That’s good, maybe I’ll get to have cake after all,” she said, her voice surprisingly strong and
unafraid.

“If you want a cake, I’ll get you a cake,” he told her with a slight uplifting of the corners of his
mouth even as his grip tightened on the hilt of the sword that hung at his side. “I’ll even help you
blow out the candles.”

“I can blow out my own candles, thanks,” she told him.

“Are you sure, love?” He asked, his voice dark and silky as he took a step toward her. “Twenty-
three is a lot of candles to blow out for such a biddy wee thing as you.”

Something about his tone, the way he was looking at her, filled Oliver with an unspeakable rage. He
began to scream and claw the ground in frustration as he tried to get the bastard’s attention off of
Felicity but his struggles were opening his wounds further and he was bleeding more profusely now.
As the blood flowed from him so did his strength.

“And I suppose you were planning on bringing me a present later as well; maybe to pay me back for
injecting you with the anti-serum?”

A strange quote popped in his mind then.

The anticipation of death brings fear but with the surety of death comes acceptance.

It was her lack of fear, her lack of any emotion really, that had scared him the most. He recognized
that look. He’d worn it himself on more than one occasion. The look she gave him belonged on the
face of someone resigned to their fate; it was an acknowledgement of the fact that she was about to
die.

“I was actually, but not because of that bit of unpleasantness,” he said as though amused by her show
of bravado. “Honestly, I wouldn’t have missed meeting you for the world even if I knew that I
would wind up living in a hole on Lian Yu for several months afterwards. Thank goodness Malcolm
decided to come pay me a visit; it was getting a bit lonely with just the rats and my ARGUS jailers
tossing food into my cell twice a day. The first thing I thought about when I got out, was how much I
wanted to see you again. After all, Oliver so rudely interrupted us the last time.”

“Listen Slade, as much as I appreciate conversations filled with veiled threats and light banter, if
you’re going to kill me then you might as well do it now,” she told him and Oliver gave a strangled
sound of agony although it wasn’t due to his injuries. Just like his mother had, she was offering her
life to Slade on a silver platter. He was going to murder her right in front of his eyes and there was
nothing he could do about it.

“You want to die, love?” He asked her curiously as he juggled his grip on the sword as though
weighing it.

“Not particularly,” she told him dispassionately. “But I won’t live my life looking over my shoulder
either. If you want to kill me, Slade; just do it. My only request is that you don’t make a spectacle of
it.”

“What’s the fun in that?” Slade asked her. “Making him watch as you die is the whole point, after all.
Without that, it’s just wasted effort on my part.”
Oliver began screaming again and Felicity glanced over at him as though begging him to quiet down. She sighed and turned her attention back to Slade, “He’s already dying, Slade,” she said evenly. “Plus, it’s my birthday or near enough; call it a last request. I don’t care if you kill me just that I go with my dignity intact. I know what happens to bodies when they die and, without going into the gross details, I’d rather not have anyone see me like that. I won’t fight you, I won’t cry; just take me somewhere off in the distance behind a rock or something where no one can see and do it, then burn my body or toss me in a truck and haul me off somewhere.”

“Haul you off?” Slade repeated with a smirk. Felicity speaking to him as though they were in the Lair and he was a member of their intimate circle seemed to amuse him greatly. “That’s a bit undignified as well, don’t you think? Just out of curiosity, how is my treating you like a bin full of rubbish any better than killing you here?”

“Simple; I have this kind of phobia about morgues,” she said, scrunching up her nose.

“Morgues?” He repeated with a twitch of his lips.

“Specifically about being naked and dead in one.” Again his lips twitched and she sighed in exasperation, “Have you ever seen the kinds of guys who work in those places? They’re creepy. Plus, they take off your clothes in the morgue. I read this article once about necrophilia and the fact that it occurs a lot more than people think and—” She stopped and took a breath, “The point is that, even if I’m dead, I still have a problem with…fluids and having some creepy guy looking up my skirt, okay?”

He leveled his weapon at her, allowing it to rest lightly on her shoulder near her throat, “While I can appreciate your reasoning, love, flawed though it may be, I didn’t do that for Moira Queen; why should I grant you your request even if it is your birthday?”

Felicity placed her hands in her pockets just as lightning lit up the sky drawing his attention to the fact that, from the knees down, the legs of her jeans were drenched in blood; far too much blood for a simple wound. His chest began to spasm in a fresh fit of coughing as waves of panic seized him. She shivered as though she was cold before stepping forward, the razor sharp blade brushing against her hair and causing a few golden strands to float away on the wind. She looked up into his one good eye and spoke, “Because I’m not Moira, that’s why, nor am I Sara or Laurel or any other woman in Oliver’s harem. We both know that I don’t really mean anything to him, I just work for him. I was just the designated bait. I’m not the woman he loves; he tricked you into believing that to save Laurel the last time. I’m expendable which is why he set me up to take the risk when he needed to inject you with the cure. You can kill me in front of him but the only one who’ll care about it is me.”

Oliver’s heart caught in his throat as she spoke. The way she said it was so matter of factly, as if she were reading him her laundry list. She couldn’t really believe that, could she; that her death would mean nothing to him?

He raised a sardonic eyebrow, “Are you telling me this so I’ll have pity on you because you’re some poor little orphan whose heart Oliver Queen left out in the cold?”

She offered him a humorless smile, “No. I’m not asking for pity or for mercy, Slade; you wouldn’t offer it if I did. I didn’t tell you that because I’m some depressed teenager with a crush quoting Sylvia Plath on my twitter feed; it’s just the truth. I am not now, nor have I ever been, Oliver’s girl.”

Oliver’s jaw clenched and he pawed at the wet earth under him as he tried to stand and failed.

“And how is this not suicide, darling?” Slade asked her, rubbing the flat of his blade on her cheek.
“You knew coming here would mean your death and yet, here you are. Why did you come? Is it because you couldn’t bear to live without your dear Oliver or is it because you just couldn’t wait to see me?” He asked with cruel sarcasm.

“I don’t know why; Call Dr. Horder,” she quipped as though his blade wasn’t mere centimeters from slicing open her carotid.

“Call who?” He asked with a frown.

“Dr. Horder…you know, from Sylvia Plath’s suicide note. She changed her mind at the last minute?” She prompted hopefully. At his blank expression she sighed, “Look, I can see how a guy who carries around swords and goes all stab-y with people might not be into feminist poetry but you didn’t even watch the movie with Gwyneth Paltrow? No? Seriously? I mean, you’re supposed to be British-adjacent; I always thought you people had a thing for her.” She wrinkled her nose then made a dismissive hand gesture, ignoring the fact that her jerky movements put her so close to the edge of his blade that even Slade looked somewhat discomfited for a moment and backed off slightly, “You know what, never mind.”

“Look, I can see how a guy who carries around swords and goes all stab-y with people might not be into feminist poetry but you didn’t even watch the movie with Gwyneth Paltrow? No? Seriously? I mean, you’re supposed to be British-adjacent; I always thought you people had a thing for her.” She wrinkled her nose then made a dismissive hand gesture, ignoring the fact that her jerky movements put her so close to the edge of his blade that even Slade looked somewhat discomfited for a moment and backed off slightly, “You know what, never mind.”

“If I’ve always been so important, then why didn’t you come for me like you did everybody else the first time around? I mean, you didn’t even notice me until the very end. I waited, for months I waited, but you never showed. It's a shame too because I bought tea and the really fancy cookies that come in the tin. I even bought you your own cup.” Her mouth curved into a grim smile, “It was black and had a little gold skull and crossbones on it and everything. I was going to get it personalized but I wasn’t sure if you’d prefer ‘Slade’ or ‘Deathstroke’ on your mug instead.”

“You’re just adorable, aren’t you, darling?” The other man’s lips twitched upwards again and he stepped forward even closer still, his eye taking on a strange cast that sent bolts of fear down Oliver’s spine. It was a smoldering look, a look of keen interest towards an attractive woman. “I bet you did it too, didn’t you? Bought me bikkies and tea and sat down in your little basement just waiting for me to come ‘round? Oh, I have missed you.”

Even though he could only see her profile, even with her hair loose and dripping wet, the wind
causing it to whip heavily around her, he knew more than anyone how beautiful she was; how she
sometimes glowed with an inner light that seemed to draw you in until everything else fell away.
Lightning struck and the ground seemed to shake as thunder echoed around them. The entire sky lit
up and, for a split second, the world was as bright as day. The smile on Slade’s face broadened as his
eye swept over her sweet face. “I wasn’t being neglectful back then, I assure you. I was merely
saving the best for last just as I was planning to do this time.”

“And I’m the best?” Felicity asked with a skeptical note. “What did I do to rate such high praise? I’m
just the executive assistant to a vigilante; a tech. I’m not a very good one either apparently. After all, I
don’t get coffee and you broke into my basement a couple of times at least despite my encryptions.
There’s absolutely nothing special about me. I’m nobody.”

“Not true,” Slade practically purred as he stepped even closer but Felicity never wavered, never
showed the slightest fear, and Oliver could sense the other man’s admiration for her increase. “I
actually think you’re quite extraordinary despite reports to the contrary.”

“Maybe you should fire your researcher then,” she suggested.

“Oh, I intend to; with prejudice, dear heart,” he said with an edge of darkness although his tone and
expression remained pleasant. “I always make a point of paying back those who betray me. Oliver
can attest to that.”

Felicity took a deep breath and he could see her square her shoulders as she centered herself. “You
do realize that you’re sick, right? The Mirakuru has made you insane. The anti-serum might have
lessened it, but you’re still delusional.”

“Why would you say that, love?” He asked her, again stepping forward until he was well into her
personal space. His hand reached out and he brushed a wet tendril of hair off her forehead, tucking it
behind her ear in an intimate gesture that sent Oliver into a rage. He began to scream obscenities at
the other man, saying anything and everything he could to take his attention off of Felicity but neither
of them seemed to notice.

“We can help you, Slade. We can find a cure and not the one we tried last time; the scientists at
STAR Labs are close to finding a real solution, we just need you to cooperate. We can cure you and
you can go back to being the man you once were. Oliver said you were once a good man, that you
loved Shado,” she told him, still calm and not reacting to either his overwhelming presence or his
touch, instead looking him in the eye and speaking with a quiet intensity as though her words could
somehow break through his madness. “You’ve done terrible things, monstrous things, but it’s still not
too late. None of this was your fault; not Moira, not any of it. The Mirakuru made you do those
things. Shado loved both of you. She wouldn’t want you to do this. Please, let us help you.”

“I appreciate the kind offer, sweet, but you’re wrong,” he told her, the darkness again passing over
his expression. “I’m perfectly sane. The ‘cure’ you injected me with cleared all that up entirely. I’m
fully aware of what I’m doing and why. Shado would want to be avenged. She deserves to be
avenged for his betrayal and he deserves to die.” He smiled coldly, “Besides, what terrible things
have I done either before or since you injected me with the ‘cure’? I took Thea but did I hurt her?
No. I kept her comfortable and safe then let her go without so much as a hair out of place. Oliver;
well, Oliver earned his punishment. Roy Harper and Moira Queen? It was unfortunate that Blood
chose to dose him with the serum but he did, and afterwards I needed the boy in order to transfuse
the Mirakuru into my soldiers. I’m not going to apologize for it; he was a common street thug and a
criminal before receiving the dark gift, not an innocent and Moira certainly wasn’t. She was as cold-
blooded as they come and a well-connected member of the League; her hands weren’t clean. As for
the rest of Oliver’s little troop; Sara, his man, Diggle, your little bronze bullyman, Detective Lance?
They stood by him, they made that choice, came here, and I did what needed to be done. There is no innocent blood on my hands.”

“What about the device, Slade?” She asked him. “Isn’t setting off an Omega Device in the middle of Starling the same as killing innocents?”

“That’s simply business; nothing personal,” he told her. “I’m a businessman first and if the client says deliver the device then I deliver the device. I always keep my word. What Merlyn wants done with it is on him.”

“Merlyn’s dead! I killed him; he’s dead!” Oliver shouted. “Now let her go, you son of a bitch!”

“He might be dead, but he’s still the client. Besides, he’s died before and found his way back,” Slade said, acknowledging him at last. “Even so, the deal was stuck; he got me out of Lian Yu on the condition I help him and I always fulfill my contracts. The fact that I got to mix business with pleasure by watching you bleed out while I destroy everyone and everything you care about is merely a bonus,” he told Oliver darkly.

Felicity reached out, placing a trembling hand on Slade’s chest and causing the man to place his entire focus back on her and away from him, “Please just stop,” she begged him. “Please, don’t do this. Don’t hurt thousands of people because of this thing between you and Oliver.”

“Too late, pet; what’s done is done,” he told her sadly, covering her hand with his and sighed. “You have such a tender heart; I really wish you’d stayed in your basement, darling. I never intended for you to be part of this and I certainly didn’t want to break your heart any more than I had to by killing all your little friends in front of you like this. I was going to swing by and pick you up when all of this was done, get you to safety.” He smiled at her again moving her trembling hand so it rested above his heart, “Believe it or not, I’m not the devil you think I am. I thought about killing you, yes,” he stroked her fingers with his own causing her to jump slightly, “especially after I found out who your father was, but it was easy to see that you were merely an innocent in all this so I let you be. Now does that sound like the act of a villain or a madman?”

“What are you talking about?” She asked jerking her hand away in alarm, a great gust of wind drowning out her words, “…have to do with this?”

“Not him, love; your biological father,” he told her. “Anthony Ivo.”

His screams cut off then and he stared at Slade in shock.

No, he thought, that wasn’t true. That was a lie. Because if it was true then…

“My biological father’s name wasn’t ‘Anthony’, it was ‘Henri’.” Oliver could hear the confusion in her voice even as his heart stopped. “Why would you think Ivo was my father?”

He was going to kill her, he thought. Despite his teasing smile and kindly tone, whether it was true or not, whether Felicity was Ivo’s daughter or if it was just another one of his delusions, Slade believed it and he was going to tear her apart with his bare hands because of it.

Slade’s smile took on a cruel twist and his eye left her to rest on Oliver’s shocked expression. “Your father’s name was Anthony Ivo but I can understand why you’d want to deny it. He was, after all, a bit of a mad scientist in addition to being a sadist. He came to Lian Yu to seek a cure for your mother’s illness; specifically Mirakuru. Ivo killed Shado because of him and he, your precious Oliver,” he nodded in his direction, “he killed your father.”

“What are you talking about? I--!” She turned her head to glance at Oliver as if to confirm what he
was saying but all the breath had left his lungs. “Oliver?”

“He won’t deny it, love. He knows it’s too late for that,” Slade said with a cruel smirk. “Besides, your father had it coming. Ivo was a monster. His obsession with finding the serum turned him into a sadistic madman. He owned a ship, the Amazo, and filled it with men he’d bought or captured then experimented on them as he sent mercenaries to the island to seek out the Mirakuru. He was being backed by the League, by Ra’s al Ghul himself, in search of this ‘miracle’ that could cure any illness and grant remarkable strength and healing abilities to anyone who was injected.” His eye fell on her again, “After Oliver injected me with the serum he supposedly destroyed it and, in revenge, Ivo killed Shado. Because of him,” he turned his attention back to Oliver, his pleasant expression gone as hatred raged in his dark eye. “He chose to save his little blonde girlfriend and he let him shoot Shado. Ivo killed her because he chose to let her die!”

“You’re wrong,” Felicity said quietly, her voice wavering for the first time. “I don’t know who told you that man was my father, but they were lying.”

“He was, love,” he said almost gently as he turned his attention to her again. “See, I didn’t get to where I am by leaving all of the details to my subordinates. After my ‘researcher’ told me how insignificant you were, I took it upon myself to dig deeper. As lovely as you are,” his gaze skimmed over her appreciatively again, “I knew Oliver didn’t just keep you around to warm his bed like they had suggested. I had you watched, followed, and despite what my source claimed, it was obvious that you were not intimately involved with him and yet you were in the inner circle as it were. I dug deep until I discovered your connection to Ivo. At first I assumed Oliver was planning his own revenge by destroying the daughter of the man who’d captured and tortured us, but that didn’t make a lot of sense as he’d already killed your father years before.”

Oliver felt his eyes close briefly and his heart clenched. This was worse than death, he thought. If Ivo was her father then she would hate him for the rest of her life, however brief that was. It didn’t matter that Ivo was a monster, that he begged him to end his life; he would have to die knowing she hated him and she would die thinking he’d murdered her father in cold blood.

Felicity turned to look at Oliver again, her eyes wide and unblinking. “It’s not true…” she said but Oliver could only look on in horror as his worst fears were brought to light.

“Imagine my amusement when I discovered that he didn’t have a clue as to who you really were,” Slade said with a dark chuckle. “But then again, neither did you. He’d left before you were even born and his name wasn’t on your birth certificate.” His fingers grasped her chin and forced her to turn to him, one of his hands cupping her cheek in a gentle caress. “I watched you very carefully after that, not that I needed a reason to watch you.”

His hand slid from her cheek to her neck, wrapping his fingers around it lightly and stroking the hollow of her throat and her collarbone with his thumb. His touch was gentle but the threat was obvious. Oliver found his voice and began to yell again but they both continued to ignore him.

“I confess that at one point I thought about killing you, of wrapping my fingers around your delicate throat and squeezing the breath from your lungs.” His tilted his head, bringing his mouth and nose to the curve of her neck and inhaled her perfume deeply. “Or, better yet, slicing through your flesh and watching Oliver’s face as you bled out.” He brought his head up, his eyes gazing deeply into hers until they were nearly nose to nose, their lips nearly touching. “But then, as I watched you and later after we had our little moment together, I realized two things: One, that it would be better to let you live so that right before I killed Oliver I could tell him that the woman he trusted above all others was the daughter of the man who tortured him and murdered Shado. And two, it was obvious that you were an innocent and, like I said before, I still have some standards, love. Besides, killing you would
be a sin,” he said with another tender look his lips skating across her cheek. “Something as precious as you is meant to be appreciated.”

“It’s a bit late to be worrying about your eternal soul, don’t you think?” She said defiantly, but a tinge of nervousness had begun to creep into her tone now.

“It’s never too late, love. Perhaps you could be my redeemer? In fact, isn’t that what you offered me just moments ago; the opportunity to be better if I allowed you to ‘cure’ me of my sins?” He reached up and brushed more of her hair off her forehead, his eye again tracing the contours of her face, “You’re an unusual girl for this day and age, you know. I knew it from the very first time I saw you. So sweet, so pure...so beautiful,” his finger lightly traced her lips and Oliver began to drag himself over with his one good arm, rage boiling within him as he continued to threaten and curse the other man with every foul obscenity he knew. “A true lady; ‘an old-fashioned girl’ as my dear old mum would say. Shado was like that at the heart of it. Oh, she wasn’t as innocent or as pure in body or deed as you, love, but she was in spirit. You remind me of her for some reason. You’re both so different and yet there’s something about you...” He pulled back slightly, his brow furrowed in chagrin. “Still, had I been faced with no other choice, as much as it would have pained me, I would have done what needed doing. Luckily for us both, that didn’t happen because an old friend reached out to me recently and requested that I allow you to live, not that I needed much convincing. He just gave me a convenient excuse to hand to Merlyn as to why you should be spared.”


“An important friend and a dangerous enemy for a man in my particular line of business, love; and someone neither I nor Malcolm Merlyn wanted to make an enemy of again if we could help it.” He smiled enigmatically, “The devil himself.”

Movement caught the edge of Oliver’s vision and he looked past Slade to the truck with the device in the back. He watched as Lance, his leg stiff and wrapped in a dark colored tourniquet limped towards the device using a branch as a makeshift crutch and placed a circular magnetic object in the wheel well under the gas tank, the pale blue LED lights cutting through the darkness for a second to show it had been activated before dimming.

Lance looked over to Felicity as he hurried away from the truck as best he could after planting a second charge on the crate holding the device itself. He eased off the back of the truck, their eyes meeting for a split second before his gaze caught Oliver’s. The older man seemed to age in that moment as he gave him a pitying look before continuing to limp towards cover. With a sinking feeling Oliver realized what was happening, why Felicity had been so calm, why she stood there talking to Slade for so long with that look on her face, why she kept encouraging him to take her with him. His eyes scanned her figure and he saw it at last, just barely hidden by her untucked tee shirt, there was the tell-tale bulge of a detonator in one pocket and the curve of an explosive device in the other.

He began to shout even more frantically, his words carried away by the wind and rendered ineffectual by the howl of the storm and his own declining physical state. He struggled to get to his feet but blood loss had left him weak. He began to sob in frustration as Felicity continued to bait the beast in order to give Lance the time he needed to get to safety and then she was going to set off the charges he’d planted on the truck and the one in her pocket.

They were already dead or dying, the whole team. She was the last one left standing.

They had failed to stop Slade from getting the weapon and now she was going to complete their mission even though it meant sacrificing herself. She was going to die one way or the other, by his hand or her own, and there was nothing he could do about it.
This wasn’t the plan. She was never supposed to be involved. They all agreed; all of them. Felicity wasn’t supposed to be in the line of fire. She wasn’t supposed to die. He’d placed her in this position once before and he vowed to never do it again. Yes, it had been her plan and, yes, Laurel’s life had been on the line as well as the rest of the city, but after they defeated Slade the last time he swore he would never allow that bastard anywhere near her ever again no matter what the cost.

“He--!” He coughed, a spray of blood coloring the ground in front of him. Must have nicked a lung; his breathing became labored. “Felicity!” He cried out hoarsely.

He should have kissed her.

The odd thought brushed across his mind; he should have kissed her. When he told her he loved her in order to bait the trap for Slade, when Helena came back after escaping from prison and threatened her a second time, when he let go of Connor and she held his head on her lap, stroking his hair gently as he cried behind the bar; he should have kissed her.

That moment would never happen if he couldn’t get up, not if he let her go with Slade this time. Lightning wouldn’t strike twice; this time he really would kill her.

“Felicity,” he breathed, his voice failing him. “Please don’t…” But she either couldn’t hear him or she was ignoring him entirely.

“What devil? What are you talking about?” She asked in confusion.

“A powerful man who has become somewhat of a benefactor to us both it seems; Mephistopheles, old dag, the cruel brute himself. He has a thousand names rumored to be lost throughout the centuries but, in this game, love; all roads lead to him. Enough of all that; business talk can wait,” he looked down at her affectionately. “Now, I know you’re feeling a mite bit cross with me but I do hope that in time you’ll forgive me for all this unpleasantness.” He smiled at her, a tender curving of his lips that seemed even more frightening for some reason than the mask of rage he normally wore. Lightning struck again, illuminating her features and his smile broadened, “By God, you’re a beauty, aren’t you? No picture, no mere sketch, not even a memory could compare to seeing you like this; true flesh and blood,” his hand reached out and skimmed her waist, testing her ribcage and stopping just short of her breast. Felicity stiffened, tilting her body slightly to the side so his fingers missed the bulge in her pockets as she shoved her trembling hands inside them. “I was right the last time; you are absolutely lovely to behold and far stronger than I had initially given you credit for.” He moved slightly closer to her, his eyes dropping to trace the line of her body as his hand pulled her closer, drawing slowly down her spine and pulling her toward him gently as the lightning crashed around them. “I confess, back when we first met I began to develop a bit of a crush on you,” he said in a low intimate tone. Oliver somehow leveraged himself up on his forearms and began to inch toward them. He screamed in pain and fury as the other man’s hand dipped down to the curve of her denim-clad behind. “I’ve never stopped feeling tender towards you either. Struth but my little crush has become a full blown swell of emotions that the months away have deepened considerably.” His nose nuzzled into her wet curls and he inhaled deeply once again.

His head bent towards her, his mouth so close to her ear that Oliver could see her tremble at his proximity. “You’re so like her, you know. You wouldn’t think so; you’re the sun where she was the moon, but you share a spirit. So courageous, so beautiful; how lucky am I to have met not one, but two such women in my lifetime? Seeing your eyes spark with righteous indignation as they caught the flash of the lightning,” he straightened, his hands drawing upwards to cup her elbows and grinned down at her, “magnificent. I couldn’t kill you after that; no, you’re too rare a bird. Why would I ever have cause to hurt you, love? I want you to know that I would have never laid so much as a harsh finger on your beautiful skin even without the terrible ghost himself stepping in at the
eleventh hour as he did. From this moment on, you will always be safe, love; you will be cherished, protected, and you will always belong to me.” He swallowed as his finger brushed the line of her throat, traced the deep V of her neckline, and stopped just above where her dark tee-shirt clung to her breasts, the impression of her lace bra and tight nipples visible through the thin wet fabric. His eye took on a strange light, as if the reflective flash of the storm raging around them was caught in its dark depths. His hand brushed her wet hair from her cheek before cupping it tenderly, “I won’t make the same mistakes with you that I made with her, sweet. You’re coming with me where I’ll see to it that you’re kept far away from the likes of Oliver Queen.”

“You’re going to kill him,” she reminded him. “Do you honestly think I could ever feel anything for you after that?”

“Perhaps not,” He said with a smirk. “Tell you what, in the spirit of your birthday that will be my gift to you: Oliver Queen will live.” Finally, he turned his eye toward his bloody and battered form and chuckled, “He’ll live knowing what it was that he lost and you’ll live a long and comfortable life with me just like Shado should have. You’ll want for nothing and, in time, you’ll forget this life; forget him.” Again, he smiled, the strange light in his eye tinged with madness, “You’ll even want to thank me for this someday, but no need. It is my honor to take you under my protection. My former companion was so disappointing. She failed me twice, but you…” he gave another soft laugh. “That would be just too perfect; a fitting replacement for so many reasons. After all, Ivo took Shado from me; it’s only fitting that I take his daughter as my new companion in exchange.” He ran his finger across her cheek again and smiled benevolently. “I will give you such a good life, I promise you,” he breathed against her lips, “A life filled with untold pleasures,” his other hand skimmed her abdomen and moved upwards to brush against her nipple causing her to jerk away and Oliver to scream and toss one of the arrows he found on the ground toward him ineffectually, the tip landing just short of the other man's ankle.

“So, instead of killing me you want to force me to become your companion?” She made no attempt to hide her disgust even though she was now clearly terrified. “I thought you said you were an honorable man,” Felicity spat out. “How is taking a woman against her will honorable?” At her words, Oliver again mustered up the last of his strength and began to drag his bloody body through the dirt and mud again in desperation. He found another arrow, the shaft broken in half from being trampled under Slade’s foot, but the tip was still sharp enough to penetrate flesh. He wouldn’t touch her again, he vowed. He’d drive his arrow through the bastard’s skull for touching her like that! Somehow he had to save her but he was so weak…so weak…

He collapsed and the light began to fade as his blood pressure dropped. He stopped calling out to her and attempted to catch his breath in order to muster his strength.

“I won’t have to force you; I promise, love,” he told her with a slow grin. “You’ll come along willingly because I’ll let him live and even see to it he gets proper medical attention before we go. Even then I won’t lay a finger on you until you’re ready for me. I actually had a slow seduction in mind already. You deserve to be loved with the utmost care and patience, after all; just like she should have been.” He ran his thumb just under her full bottom lip, “I wanted to take my time, bring you to the point that when I do have you in my bed you’ll be a willing participant. It’s better that way, you see; more satisfying for us both and you are worth the extra effort, that’s obvious.” His mouth dipped towards hers again in a near kiss, “I have so much to teach you,” he whispered, then covered the last few millimeters of distance that separated them, tasting her at last. It was just a fleeting caress of his lips on hers before she again jerked away, her absolute terror now painfully obvious.

“Oh my, you’re positively covered in goosebumps.” He chuckled as he straightened, lifting her hand and bringing it out of her pocket. He kissed the back of it gently as her spine stiffened but she didn’t
snatch it away. “Such cold hands and you’re shaking like a leaf. Let me warm them for you.” He brought the second one up and rubbed them between his own, blowing on them as she seemed to vibrate with fear and cold even though the air around them was almost sweltering despite the storm.

“You’ve such thin blood, love; we should get you out of this weather before you catch your death.” Her breath hitched as tears mixed with the rain on her cheeks and he chuckled again. “Now, now,” he grinned in triumph, “no arguing with me and no pouting. We can’t have you getting sick; we have a long journey ahead of us.” He dropped her hands gently and ran the back of his knuckles along her cheek bone again, “Oh my sweet darling girl, I know you’re scared; I know all these,” he took a breath, his eyes skimming her form again, “passionate urges you’re experiencing must seem so confusing to someone who’s been as sheltered as you, but I promise to make our eventual coming together as precious a memory as I can. You’ll come to see that in time. I only hate that we had to start off on such bad footing. If only you were just the little mouse of a secretary I was told you were when all this began and had never been touched by this ugliness, I would have been able to woo you with flowers and chaste kisses; I would have had the honor of treating you like the lady you are. Unfortunately, you’ve fallen into the same trap as my Shado did. He seduced you, love; perhaps not in the carnal sense, but he convinced you of his loyalty and honor when he has none. It will take a bit more effort on my part now, but it will be worth it in the end, I think.”

“That will never happen in a million years,” she assured him, her voice filled with disgust. “Even if you take me with you, even if I go along willingly, the Arrow has friends, I have friends; friends who will stop at nothing to get to me and they will hunt you down to the ends of the Earth if that’s what it takes!”

“You have no friends, love; only me,” he said with a surprising amount of compassion. “I’m your only true friend left. I’ve been watching you, remember? You’re all alone in this world, sweet. The only person who will ever come for you is me. You go home alone, you eat alone, you wake up alone; every hour you are not with him and his little gang, you’re bundled up in your tiny little house all by yourself. I’ve had eyes on you for a while now and not one man has ever knocked upon your door save the copper and he wasn’t even there to see you; he was there for his murdering whore daughter. You, my sweet, are inconsequential both to him and to her.”

He moved closer to her, his lips thinning apologetically as his brow furrowed in something approaching sympathy, “No one else cares about you but me. Oliver used you and your feelings for him as he took one woman after the other into his bed and treated you like you didn’t even exist. He set you up as a sacrificial goat and called you his ‘friend’, but was he yours?” He looked over at Oliver and sneered, “Did he ever once check on you? Did he try to protect you? No. I doubt he’s ever even bothered to find out where you lay your head at night once he’s done with you. The first time he was so vigilant, but this time?” He shook his head, “I’ve been gone from Lian Yu for weeks and he never once came to your door in all that time. Oliver had his women, his man, Diggle, had his own concerns, and, once again, you were left all alone. Were you mine I would have had an entire squad of men guarding your doorstep but he couldn’t even be bothered to pop by; even after I took you the last time he ignored you. I could have killed you a thousand times over if I wanted to because he was so negligent. I even snuck into your little house one day on a lark to watch you sleep while he ran from the bed of one sister to another just to see if he’d notice.”

“What?” She asked, suddenly going pale with shock.

“Hmm,” he said with a low purr. “How sweet you were in your cozy little bed with the flowery sheets, curled around your pillow, and dressed in a pretty pink nightgown with your painted toes peeking out from under the covers. You almost looked like a child; you slept as only the truly innocent can. I was sorely tempted to crawl into bed beside you and hold you in my arms but I didn’t want to disturb your sleep so I gave you a bit of a kiss instead,” he smiled, the madness shining out of his eye then. “You made such a sweet noise at that and snuggled closer to me as if you knew I
was there and you were finally safe. I tucked you in before heading into your kitchen. I was there so long that I was able to have a look around and tidy up a bit.” His smile broadened, “I found that lovely white lace summer frock on the back of your door and put it away for you. I had hoped to see you in it someday but we’ll buy you another soon enough.”

Felicity shook her head in denial, “No…”

He tutted, “Hush, it’s no bother; it will be my pleasure to spoil you in the days to come. I’ll buy you dresses and jewelry; anything that catches your fancy is yours for the asking.” He paused, “You know, many women these days feel they must expose themselves in order to attract attention, but what I adore about you is that you don’t feel the need to create such an obvious spectacle of yourself. You are always so modestly attired and ladylike; like a princess. My princess; saving all your hidden treasures for my eyes only,” he said, drawing his finger down her arm and causing her to shudder and him to grin possessively. “I put it away, tucked your glasses back into their case so they wouldn’t get scratched, and then made sure all your windows and doors were locked up tight so that no one could get to you.” He tilted his head closer, “I even fixed myself a sandwich and started your dishwasher before I left. Never let it be said that I don’t pull my own weight around the house, love.”

“No…” she breathed. “I thought-- I didn’t-- but--!” Her breath began to hitch again and she started to hyperventilate as her eyes grew large.

He made a soothing noise, “Yes, love. I could have killed you just that easily but I didn’t. I protected you, in fact, so no need to fret. I kept you safe then and I promise no one will ever hurt you. You’re my woman now and I keep what’s mine,” he told her, the darkness creeping into his tone as his eye lit up with that unholy fire once again. “My former companion wanted to have you killed out of, what I suspect, was jealousy on her part, but I wouldn’t allow it. No, you were mine and I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you, not even her. I knew I’d be taking you long before I saw the little play the two of you staged for me. Unlike Oliver, I was always your champion and you’ll see that in time.”

“You’re lying,” she told him. “That never happened! None of that ever happened,” she nearly shouted in denial, her shoulders shaking as she began to cry in earnest.

He shook his head, “But it did. Don’t cry, darling; there’s no need for all that fuss now. I don’t wish to upset you; I just need you to finally realize the truth: Oliver Queen does not love you, his man, Diggle, cannot protect you and neither can he. Neither of them care enough about you to even try. All you have now is me; I’m all you’ve ever had, love. There is no other man to warm your bed and treat you the way you deserve, no friends or family who knock upon your door except the ones who are tainted by his deceit. I’ve never lied to you; unlike him. Saving you from this empty existence would be a blessing and part of you knows that; it’s why you came to me before I came looking for you. Your presence here just proves what I already know; you belong to me.”

Somewhere deep inside him something broke when he heard those words. Using the last of the air in his lungs he screamed, the blood spraying out of his mouth like spittle, “Get away from her, you motherfucker!”

He laughed and glanced over at his bleeding and broken body dismissively before turning his attentions back to Felicity, “Besides darling, you should know by now that I’m a patient man and I always get what I want eventually,” he said with another amused chuckle. “Even if it takes years, sooner or later I’ll have you just like I should have had her; body and soul.”

“You’ll never own me, Slade,” she promised him brokenly. “Whatever it takes, no matter what I have to do, that will never happen.”

“You’re absolutely brilliant, love; so full of passion and fire. You’re so much like her in spirit.” His
voice grew intimate and seductive, “She haunted me, you know; her ghost. She would whisper in
my ear, drive me mad with lust and vengeance, but she was all that I had left so I clung to her just
like you’re trying to cling to him now. Even when I took another woman into my bed, it was her I
felt wrapped around me, but then I saw you.” That strange light glinted in the dark depths of his gaze
once more. “Ever since that first time I looked into your beautiful blue eyes, so different from hers, so
different from anyone’s, she began to fade away and I could feel her soul enter you. That’s why I let
him take you back, it’s why I couldn’t so much as mark your precious flesh; I saw it, the light that
seemed to shine around you, and I couldn’t hurt you. Not even to punish him. Shado had that same
light. It’s strange,” he mused. “I didn’t even notice you at first, not even when I was watching all of
them. I saw you, of course, but until I spent time with you, until we had our little conversation, I
never knew just how special you were. It was as though…” He frowned suddenly, “It was as though
you were hidden from me and then, one day, you just suddenly appeared. Just like when you--” The
light began to die as he seemed to come to his senses. He shook his head in confusion. “How did
you do that? Why didn’t I notice that until now? You just appeared to me; came out of nowhere…
how?”

“You’re insane,” she said scornfully. “Listen to what you’re saying, Slade! You’re talking gibberish!
There are no ghosts! I’m not Shado! There is no you and me! Ivo killed Shado, not Oliver, and he
wasn’t my father! My father’s name was Henri! My mother said so!” She stepped towards him,
“Listen to me! I’m trying to help you, Slade! The Mirakuru has affected your mind but it’s not too
late! Take this chance I’m trying to give you; give us both! You can snap out of it if you try, really
try!”

The confusion left his expression as the glint of obsession returned. He gave her a superior yet
pitying look, “I’m sorry, sweet, but your father was Anthony Ivo. I have it on the highest authority;
the best information broker money can buy.”

“Well, you need to ask for a refund then because they’re wrong!”

“Am I? Are you so sure of that? Anthony, Henri,” he said both names teasingly. “They sound very
similar, love. Perhaps it’s you who’s confused?”

“I’m not confused, you are!” She nearly shouted in frustration. “His name was Henri; Henri Ducard,
not Anthony Ivo!” She said insistently.

Oliver was distracted by his own sense of growing panic but, even so, he could have sworn he saw
Slade grow pale as his face froze in shock. The man actually turned away from Felicity and took
several steps towards the truck as though suddenly agitated by something she had revealed. He was
so distracted that he didn’t catch the shadowy figure of Lance as he ducked behind a large rock some
distance away from them. To Oliver’s unending horror, she trailed behind him, the distance between
them growing further than he could ever hope to cross in his weakened condition.

Slade turned to her, his eye narrowing as the expression of blithe amusement made way for shrewd
calculation. His lips twitched upwards slightly but it was a different sort of humor that lit up his
expression this time. “When you said you had friends, love, you weren’t kidding. This explains why
he went after Savant, why he contacted me out of the blue; the olive branch the demon extended to
both myself and Merlyn on the condition you be kept alive... It explains a lot actually.”

“Who?” Felicity asked in frustration. “Who are these people you keep talking about? More ghosts?
Devils? What? Are you having conversations with Lucifer now?”

For a minute there Slade almost looked frightened, “Not Lucifer or Satan; the Demon, love, and like
the devil from whom he takes his name, he’s someone you don’t want to deal with unless you’re
willing to trade away your soul,” he told her, his voice growing more authoritative. “However, now
that I have you it does change things up a bit.”

“Changes what?” Felicity asked him, walking toward him and, to Oliver’s dismay, her hand reached into her pocket again as she kept her body between him and Slade.

“Nothing to worry about, darling,” he assured her. “It just means that you and I will be taking a bit of a detour while I sort out a few details with our friend. Now that I realize why he wanted me to spare you, we’ll have to come to some sort of understanding, that’s all. I had plans for us that have, apparently, become a bit more complicated and I need to make sure not to step on any toes,” he told her distractedly right before the mad gleam reentered his expression. “In fact, if we play this right it could...” He stopped and gave a bark of laughter, his smile splitting his face in two. “Bloody hell, love, I knew you were special but I had no idea how much!” He ran his hand across his beard before turning his eye toward her again, pacing back and forth and speaking rapidly as though caught in some type of manic episode. “I was never one for transcendence or philosophical debate but I knew there was something there; something profound within you. I felt it! I saw it in your eyes! I never believed before but this--this proves that our meeting is more than just some random coincidence, its fate! He’ll appreciate that knowing him. In fact, he’ll damn near insist upon it! Hah!”

“Who?” She demanded, “Ghosts, savants, demons; what are you talking about!? Who is this ‘devil’?”

“Oh, I don’t want to spoil the surprise.” He glanced up at the moon which was barely visible through the haze of clouds then smiled down at her, “Midnight, love; Happy Birthday! Tell you what; because you’ve been such a good girl, I’m going to get you something extra special just to celebrate.”

She shook her head at him, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“On our way to meet our friend I think we’re going to have to stop by the jewelers and get you a ring then find you another pretty white dress to wear. I do believe I’ve suddenly grown weary of this bachelor’s life,” he shouted, crowing with laughter as he spun around, the storm now whipping around them in a fury. “It’s the married life for me, Missus; just you wait! Hah!”

Lightning struck one of the electrical poles nearby, causing it to fall with a crack. As the sky lit up with fire, thunder shook the ground and the wind tore at the surrounding buildings with such frighteningly destructive power that it felt as though the gods themselves were expressing their fury at Slade’s sudden declaration.

“If you think I’m going to marry you then you really are nuts!” Felicity sputtered in shock.

“Oh, you will, and we’ll live happily ever after; just you, me, and baby makes three! Or four, or even ten! Why stop with one when we could have an army of the wee bitty ankle biters! If you’re willing Missus, then we’ll have you in the pudding club as often as you like! You’ll be mummy and I’ll play doting dad and we’ll rule the world alongside our little prince together!” He laughed again and the sound of metal filled the air as the squall tore a large sheet of aluminum off the roof of one of surrounding barracks. Slade appeared not to even notice as the winds began to spiral and form a funnel, quickly escalating from a tempest into a tornado. “Lots of changes coming, love.” He approached her again, his palm caressing her cheek gently as she stumbled against the grip of the storm, her hand still clenched around the small detonator she had palmed when he wasn’t looking, “You and I are going to take a bit of a ‘round the world honeymoon; now doesn’t that sound lovely?”

“I don’t think so,” she spat out, her calm demeanor finally cracking as she lurched away from him as if to flee.
He stopped her instantly and without any visible effort. “Sorry Missus, but I’m afraid that you’re coming with me, whether you like it or not,” he said. He reached out and lifted her up and over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes with his arm wrapped tightly around her legs, her head and torso hanging upside down behind his back. He gave her a sharp pat on the butt causing her to yell at him in outrage as he stomped towards the truck containing the device. They continued to speak but Oliver could no longer hear them as the wind and rain drowned out their voices, the weather growing ever more violent the closer they got to the truck. He watched in horror as Felicity squirmed in his grasp, reaching into her other pocket and, unbeknownst to Slade, and took out the round LED charge before fixing it to the metal of his armor. He watched in horror as a flash of blue cut through the dark indicating she had activated it just before they disappeared behind the armored truck.

“Felicity, no!” He screamed her name just as the world exploded around him.

And then darkness descended at last.

Oliver swallowed down the bile that threatened to spill from his throat and tried to concentrate on the story his partner was sharing with their new associates. He forced a smile to his face as he tried to hide both the effect the memories had caused and his exasperation for the other man’s enthusiastic rehashing of one of their less than dignified missions.

He couldn’t fault him though; despite it dredging up memories best left in the past, they’d had so little joy in the foundry since Felicity left. He heard the laughter around him ring out again and he moved his focus back to his partner and the people around him.

“…and she is already pissed over her shoes, let me tell you!” Diggle turned to their new acquaintances, his smile widening as he continued his story. “Picture this; it was me, Oliver, and Lance down there, all of us hobbling around on crutches looking like hell and smelling even worse with about a dozen or more alligators and crocodiles hissing all around us that this freaking nutcase stole from the zoo. Meanwhile Thea is doing all of the heavy lifting and saving our asses by holding them off with some kind of electric cattle prod while we’re whacking them with our crutches and trying to get to Felicity. The Sewer King, who, by the way, is dressed like Captain Hook from Peter Pan, has this huge ass albino alligator on a leash in one hand and an antique flintlock pistol in the other. He starts rambling on about how he’ll make Felicity his ‘Queen of the Underworld’ until she just stops him mid-ramble and says, ‘Sorry Captain Flushles, but if I’m hooking up with any pirates it’ll either be Johnny Depp or that guy from ‘Once Upon a Time’, not the King of the Royal Post-Flush Gang. That said, I might have some of those little pine thingies in my car if you need to freshen up the joint.’”

“Oh my God!” Barbara said gasping for air.

“Then what happened?” Tim said with a snicker.

“He was so surprised he drops the nose of his pistol and she comes up with a cross block, disarms him, then hauls off and punches him in the nose! Knocks him right on his pirate costumed ass!”

They all started guffawing loudly but Oliver just shook his head ruefully, “Yeah, that was… unpleasant.”

“Why? Seems to me that the asshole deserved it,” Luke said.

“That wasn’t what he was referring to,” Diggle said, his dark eyes still glittering with merriment.

“When he went down…well, let’s just say we all got a firsthand demonstration of why sewer
alligators are highly unlikely to replace the Golden Retriever as the world’s most trusted family pet.”

They all began to laugh uproariously, even Luke although he still appeared a bit peeved about the fact that his sister was held at both gunpoint and hostage to a sewer dwelling pirate.

“I am really going to have to start getting that girl to call me more often,” Barbara said as she wiped her eyes under her glasses. “She needs to start giving with the details!”

“Tell me about it,” Luke said ruefully. “Apparently I’m even more out of the loop than you are. I didn’t even know she had left IT much less the rest of all this.”

“Is it just me or is it weird that Baby’s life is more exciting and fraught with danger than ours now?” Barbara asked, still shaking her head. “I mean, I remember when her idea of exciting was talking about upgrades to Watchtower with her feet propped up on the console and now she’s this bad-ass action hero in a pencil skirt and sensible heels.”

“I don’t understand why she didn’t tell me any of this stuff,” Luke grumbled in frustration. “I didn’t know any of this stuff much less that she was dating---!” He gestured towards Oliver then grimaced, “No offence.”

Diggle shot him a rather displeased look himself and Oliver cleared his throat, biting down the urge to correct him in that they never actually ‘dated’, merely slept together, “None taken.”

“You’re lucky, I already got to hear about this stuff and then some a while back,” Tim snorted. At their curious looks he hitched his thumb towards Luke. “I’m dating his other sister and they talk about everything, and I mean everything. I now know way more about Bruce’s sex life than I ever wanted to.” He stopped short, eyes growing wide as he realized what he just said and Oliver’s mouth tightened into a grim line.

“Smooth Timmy, very smooth,” Barbara told him under her breath as the pleasant atmosphere suddenly grew extremely awkward and uncomfortable.

Luke shook his head and gave both men a pitying look, “Damn, now I really am feeling bad about punching you. That was cold.”

Tim winced, “I wasn’t thinking and it just slipped out! I’m really...”

“It’s...fine,” Oliver said tightly. “Felicity and I spoke recently and she told me everything about her relationship with Wayne and that they were together. You didn’t say anything I didn’t already know.”

“Really?” Tim asked in surprise.

“Yeah, we’re good; it’s fine,” Oliver assured him despite the fact that his stomach had begun to tangle into knots.

“Oh good,” Tim breathed a sigh of relief. “I was kind of worried that I’d accidently blurt something out and that it would lead to all kinds of problems and so when that just popped out...”

“No,” Oliver said with a humorless smile. “We actually talked about it for a while and I gave her my blessing. We ended it on a positive note.”

“That’s good to hear,” Tim said sincerely. “That’s...man, you have my undying respect for handling it this well. If it were me, I doubt I could be as cool as all that, and I definitely wouldn’t be able to offer my blessings if I found out that Tam was getting married to another guy this soon after ending it
with me.”

Everyone in the room stopped and stared at Tim in shock.

Tim’s jaw snapped shut as he looked over all of their expressions which ranged from genuine shock to barely contained rage. “Shit,” he hissed through clenched teeth.


“Nope,” Tim said without hesitation.

“Timothy, did Bruce ask Baby to marry him?” Barbara asked slowly.

Tim shifted uncomfortably, “Um, no comment?”

“When the hell did this happen and how in the hell did you find out about it before me?” Luke growled.

“More importantly, did she say yes?” Barbara added eagerly.

“Are you okay?” Diggle asked quietly as he stepped next to Oliver. The other man didn’t say anything; he just gave a curt nod, the veins in his temple standing out angrily as he clenched his teeth together.

“Why don’t we show you the set up and then we’ll introduce you to the rest of the team?” Oliver said evenly as he stepped forward, changing the subject.

“Good idea; excellent in fact,” Tim said quickly as he stepped forward, avoiding the glares of his companions. “So when do I get to meet Roy?”

“Soon,” Oliver said as he led them over to the workout area, his body language still stiff but his expression devoid of emotion. “He works upstairs with Thea so they should both be down to introduce themselves before the club opens.”

“That’s great; looking forward to it!” Tim said a little overenthusiastically.

Luke gave him a hard look as he leaned close to him, “And, by the way, we will be talking about this later on, I promise you.”

“Fantastic,” Tim said morosely.

Sometime later Oliver stood on the sidelines with Barbara and Luke as Diggle and Tim sparred together using the eskrima sticks. The younger man’s skills were impressive to say the least. Diggle was far from a slouch but, even so, he was having a hard time keeping up with the younger man’s speed and punishing accuracy.

With a move that was so fast it was almost impossible to track, Tim stepped forward and disarmed the other man with seemingly little effort causing the other man to raise his hands in surrender. “Okay, I’m tapping out,” he said panting. “And I thought Oliver gave me a workout. Man kid, you’re good.”

“Thanks,” Tim said, twirling his batons with a flourish. “Of course, the sticks and the Bo Staff are my go-to weapons. I’m kind of looking forward to seeing just how good Oliver is with a bow. I wouldn’t mind picking up some skills in that particular area.”
“I think we could arrange that,” Oliver said as he stepped forward to take the sticks from Diggle. “But first I wouldn’t mind going toe to toe with you myself on these.”

“This is going to be fun,” Luke told Dig as he settled back to watch the show.

“I have to tell you, my boy is pretty good,” Dig warned.

“He’s not as good as Tim,” Luke said confidently.

“I don’t know,” Dig said doubtfully.


“I’ve been known to make a bet or two,” Dig said with a spark of interest. “Any particular stakes in mind?”

“Loser buys dinner?” He suggested.

Dig grinned, “You’ve got a deal. If Tim takes down Oliver then I’ll spring for dinner; if Oliver takes down your guy then you get to make the run to Big Belly.”

“Is that the burger joint Baby keeps talking about?” Luke said with an eager glint in his eye. “I do love a good cheeseburger or six. You’ve got a deal, my man,” he said shaking his hand.

Oliver stripped off his shirt, revealing his scarred and tattooed flesh. He watched the expressions on his young companions as they took in the testimony of the other man’s trial by fire that was etched upon his skin. They weren’t as hard struck or horrified as most people were the first time they saw the evidence of his torture and survival, but there were traces of surprise; less so from Tim and Barbara than Luke he noted. Perhaps it was because Felicity had told them what to expect but they didn’t seem shocked to see that the scars existed, it was merely the extent of them that seemed to take them aback. Tim quickly schooled his features into a look of casual indifference as the two men squared off and then came at each other in a blur of motion and noise as the steel sticks clashed together with a metallic clang.

Diggle watched from the sidelines with professional interest as Tim employed a Shaolin Stick Fighting technique by beginning with Yin Shou, or a palms facing down grip, as opposed to Oliver who used the Sinawali double stick weaving form which was more traditional with the Filipino fighting sticks, and paired that with a Redonda fan strike allowing for extremely fast strikes that were hardly visible to the naked eye.

It made sense to him that Tim would choose to use Shaolin techniques as well as Bojutsu given that his weapon of choice was first and foremost a staff. Although Oliver was an expert at the less rigid, though no less effective, types of melee attacks used with traditional eskrima, Tim’s technique was far more refined. He could see the skill and intelligence in the younger man’s attacks, the elegance and precision in his movements, but that type of rigid discipline could sometimes be a double-edged sword.

From the corner of his eye he watched as Luke smiled; his expression confident. He glanced over to Barbara who had left her place at the workstation to wander close. Her eyes told a different story. She saw what he did; Luke was about to be very disappointed.

Wayne had said Barbara was an expert at eskrima and he could see that as he looked at her now. Even without ever seeing her hold a stick or engage in battle, he knew, because she was a survivor,
like Oliver, and eskrima itself was a story of survival. Created by the uneducated peasant class in response to subjugation by their European conquerors who took from them their blades and swords, eskrima was a martial art born out of desperation and ingenuity.

Clack-clack-clack; the sticks came together over and over, their movements so quick the air currents swirled around them like a mini windstorm. Both men were art in motion but where Tim held his sticks with a refined grip, brandishing them like brushes as he wrote through the air like a calligraphy master, Oliver was efficient, savage, and he moved without thought. He was pure muscle memory, his entire focus on his opponent because he no longer had to think about the sticks; they were now merely an extension of his body. The shorthand of death had become so ingrained within his movements that his mind was completely free to observe his opponent. Both techniques were remarkably effective but Oliver, being older and more battle worn, seemed to have a slight edge over the younger man. That wasn’t to say Tim wasn’t more than holding his own. His skills and speed were almost preternaturally fast and accurate and he moved with an almost fluid grace, but Oliver was all anger and directed rage at the moment as he exercised his demons over the recent revelations about Felicity the younger man had accidently allowed to slip and Dig could see him forcing the other man backwards with every punishing strike.

As elegant and refined as Tim’s techniques were, and as effective as he undoubtedly was against 99% of his opponents, this was not merely a sparring session for Oliver. Oliver did not ever merely ‘spar’. He was first and foremost a survivor and that instinct never went away. Diggle squeezed his hand into a fist, feeling the skin pull tight over his scarred knuckles where Oliver had split the skin the first time they had ever ‘sparred’ together. He’d learned early on that Oliver was not afraid to spill blood on the mats. There were no bamboo sparring sticks in the foundry, no blunted weapons, or ‘practice’ swords. If you got hit, you bled, just like in real life. The only rule they had was no killing blows; everything else that stopped short of permanent incapacitation was allowed. The reason for that was Oliver; it was the only way he knew. He didn’t learn the Art of War in a dojo, he learned it on a godforsaken beach in the middle of nowhere and his reward for a job well done wasn’t a colored belt or a trophy, it was survival.

It was for that reason that Barbara, like Diggle, could see what Luke and Tim could not; Oliver had already won. The only reason the fight was still waging is because Oliver was testing him. He could have taken him down at any time.

As Tim slipped into a Praying Mantis blocking stance to lower his center of gravity and throw Oliver’s strikes off, Oliver countered with a powerful fan strike, causing one of Tim’s weapons to fly out of his hands followed by several low groupings of a block, a V-strike, and finishing with a drop strike as he swept his opponent’s legs from under him while causing the other stick to leave his hand and clatter on the floor. Tim hit the ground hard, the thick pad saving him from damage but the speed and skill behind the attack still causing him to have the wind knocked from his lungs.

“Shit,” Luke said as he flinched in sympathy. For his friend or for himself for having to pick up the tab for dinner Dig didn’t know.

Oliver tucked the sticks under his arm in one fluid movement and reached down to help the other man off the floor, “You alright?” He asked him. Oddly enough, Oliver appeared more relaxed now than he had at the beginning of the match. For some reason intense sparring always had an almost meditative effect on him as though attacking a problem with his fists somehow put things into perspective.

“Yeah,” Tim said breathlessly as he accepted the other man’s hand up. “Wow, you’re almost as good as Bruce.”
“Almost?” Oliver asked with an amused lift of his eyebrow.

He shrugged, “Well, to be fair, I’ve never actually seen you in action other than our sparring match so I have to give Bruce the benefit of the doubt but I’d love to see the two of you go at it one on one just to be sure.”

“Hopefully I’ll be able to make that happen,” Oliver said with a slightly more serious expression. “After all, I do owe him a response for the message he sent me. Plus I should really give him my congratulations on his upcoming nuptials in person.”

“Yep,” Dig said under his breath. “This is just starting to get good.”
Chapter Thirty-Six
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After Felicity dropped Sara off at the airport and stopped by the grocery store for some supplies she had the driver take her back to the penthouse, otherwise known as the ‘scene of the crime’.

She sighed as she slung her purse, laptop bag, and overnight bag over her shoulders then loaded her arms with the three full bags of groceries she picked up before exiting the cab and heading inside the building. She told her dad that she wanted to get a head start on Bruce’s ‘special project’ and, given that she had to be at the penthouse first thing anyway, she decided to spend a few nights there. Peggy hadn’t been happy about it but, luckily, her dad understood. Since she told Tam not to mess with the office or the master bedroom she was hoping that she could just live in the mess of the remodel until it was all sorted; if not then she’d find a hotel or something. As long as she was dealing with all of this, she wanted to at least put a little space between her and her dad’s place.

Of course, it’s not like they couldn’t find them if things did go pear shaped but, chances are, she’d be the target, not Lucius or Peggy Ann. Not that she was really worried about that. If the OO wanted to kill her she’d already be dead. No, it was simply being done as a precaution so she could focus on her mission and not them while having the freedom to come and go as she needed without having to juggle the truth. Another reason she wanted to be there wasn’t just the access to Watchtower, but because the Wayne Foundation penthouse was practically a fortress. Bruce had made sure to build all his buildings to withstand earthquakes of at least 8.5 on the Richter magnitude scale with top of the line security measures especially when it came to the top floor.

The Wayne Foundation Building was a Gotham landmark, noted for its unique design with a large
open atrium in the center representing life, growth, and renewal, a revolving restaurant called The Carousel that was fully encased in glass to provide the best views of Gotham to its patrons (while hiding a secret elevator shaft to the alternate Batcave in the center turning mechanism) and, of course, the penthouse which was located on the very top. Bruce designed it himself and it had a definite Frank Lloyd Wright vibe with a modern design, a waterfall pool, and a roofline garden with dwarf fruit and flowering trees and shrubbery that enhanced, rather than obscured, the sweeping views of the city skyline and the river.

Even though it was located in a part of the city known more for its rundown factories and warehouses, the Wayne Foundation rose above it all like a beacon of hope with three towering sculptures of the gods Hermes, Nike, and Asclepius in the center of The Thomas Wayne Memorial Fountain keeping vigil out front and surrounded by the lush bounty of Martha Wayne’s favorite roses. In addition to headquartering the many executive offices of the various Wayne Charitable Foundations it also had a well-equipped gym, a museum, a shopping mall, various other rented and leased offices, daycares, educational centers, clinics, and an underground parking garage.

While all the other floors were accessible to the public, the penthouse had its own private elevator requiring a numerical code and a key card to enter. In addition to that, the windows of the penthouse were all made of bullet-proof earthquake glass and there were hidden 'panic buttons' throughout completely locking everything down just in case the building’s security was breached. Knowing that she was in a secured location made it easier to think and plan and she had a pretty good idea that she’d need that extra little confidence boost in the days to come.

The minute she stepped through the doors, security informed her that the clothes and boxes they’d retrieved from Tam’s storage units that morning had arrived then issued her a security key for the elevator as per Bruce’s instructions. The guard also offered to help her with her bags and, since it saved her from having to go through the trouble of dealing with the elevator panel and swiping her card while juggling groceries and her overnight bag, she accepted his help gratefully.

After she thanked him for his help and put everything away in the kitchen, she dragged herself into the master bedroom and tossed her overnight bag on the dresser, stripping off her clothes as she went. She was tired, bone tired, and as nice a day as it had been, she was far too exhausted to worry about being neat. Security had left all the clothing racks in the foyer and, even though she knew she should probably start putting them away before taking her bath, she just wasn’t in the mood.

She dug out her cosmetics case along with her favorite shampoo, conditioner, and soap before heading into the large en suite to draw a bath. More like a swimming pool, Felicity thought, looking at the huge whirlpool tub with a covetous sigh as she put her things away while she waited for it to fill. Luckily, even though the custom sized tub was far larger than the old claw-footed one she’d left behind in Starling, the high flow taps filled it in half the time. As soon as the water level had risen high enough, Felicity turned on the heater and the jets before easing into the bath, humming with pleasure as the water pulsed all around her. She took a moment to look around the richly appointed master bath before dunking her head under the water, pouring some of her favorite shampoo in her hands, and scrubbing the dust and sweat from her hair as she lost herself in the clean summery notes of honey, melon, citrus, and sharply scented green herbs.

Her stomach rumbled and she grimaced. You know you’re hungry when the smell of your shampoo makes your stomach growl.

Between the lack of sleep and her appetite that was either on or off, she was a mess. She hadn’t been sleeping well at all and she’d racked up almost as much sleep debt as she would have working both her jobs back in Starling if not more. Plus, the stress was messing with her blood sugar. She really needed to get it together and start maintaining a regular eating and sleeping schedule because she was
beginning to lose weight. She wasn’t exactly wasting away or anything, it couldn’t have been a loss of more than five pounds or so, but it was enough that her clothes were getting a bit loose. This morning she skipped breakfast because she’d been too depressed to eat, skipped lunch because of Tam, and now she was seriously contemplating skipping dinner because she was exhausted and, as hungry as she was, even the thought of walking to the kitchen seemed like too much trouble.

She blinked blearily. Screw it; she could go one day without eating.

Her stomach churned again in protest.

Or not.

Luckily, Tim and an entire day of fasting had inspired her to buy a ton of deli meats and cheeses along with a crudités tray, the ingredients for a hearty soup she intended to toss into the slow cooker she’d uncovered in the kitchen tomorrow, and lots of nibbles and necessities like coffee, Diet Coke, and tea.

Caffeine was not optional if she was going to make it through the night.

Cleaning out Tam’s storage units turned into a bigger workout than she’d imagined it would be. Not to mention the fact that, once again, she’d gotten almost no sleep the night before because of her fight with Bruce. All she wanted to do was get clean, make a sandwich, and hit the sheets before she had to man Watchtower that night. Hopefully Bruce would keep it professional and call it a day early enough so that she could get in a couple of hours’ worth of sleep before she had to head to the OO facility in the morning.

Not that he knew that’s what she was planning; as far as he knew she was just meeting with the decorators. Tam was planning on being there first thing in the morning which meant that she needed to be out and about before dawn in order to avoid Bruce. Hopefully he wasn’t planning on being there, but she wasn’t taking any chances.

She did her best to make it hard on him though. She chose to go to Orbital a day earlier than planned for a lot of reasons, not least of which was the fact that he and Lucius usually scheduled their meetings with the various department heads on Tuesdays. His schedule was bound to be packed tomorrow until late afternoon but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t blow it off just so he could try to catch her off guard. If she was lucky (and she so very rarely was these days) he’d still be in the middle of his sulk and choose to remain at the office all day, never knowing she sent Tam to meet the decorators in her place. If his Bat-Butt did show up then all hell was going to break loose but, hopefully, she’d have the information she needed by this time tomorrow and that made putting up with the ubiquitous hissy fit he was bound to pull all worth it.

She rinsed out her hair and applied the conditioner, enjoying the unique combination of scents as they teased her senses. Where the shampoo was fruity and green, the conditioner was a light floral scent that made her think of summer picnics surrounded by wildflowers at her family’s lake house.

God, she missed summer; warm weather, cool breezes off the lake, and definitely no dirty gray snow and ice. She was so over freezing her ass off it wasn’t even funny. When all this was over she was definitely taking a vacation; a very warm vacation. Piling her golden locks on top of her head, she began scrubbing her body with the delicately scented goat’s milk herbal soap she got from Tam for Hanukah.

At least the tub was nice, she thought as steam rose from the water. Rinsing off her arms and torso, she looked around the bathroom again. It definitely wasn’t her quaint little bungalow though, that’s for sure. Not to say it wasn’t wonderful; it was just overwhelmingly Bruce.
It was a beautiful room, but definitely a masculine one. The shower and tub were both the height of luxury and built for a man of Bruce’s size in mind. The shower alone was nearly the size of her old bedroom. Okay, that was an exaggeration, she thought, but you could easily fit a queen sized bed and a couple of nightstands in there. The steam shower was completely done in a deep gray and white marble with a long stone bench and multiple taps. Floor to ceiling clear glass separated it from the rest of the room but the same gray marble made up the steps and surrounding frame of the custom built whirlpool tub. It was wide enough for two people to sit side by side and long enough to easily accommodate Bruce’s 6'2” frame even if he was fully extended.

After a few minutes she rinsed the conditioner out of her hair and settled back to enjoy a well-deserved soak after her long and exhausting day chasing after her sister and her obsession with clothes.

“Sara was right,” she muttered out loud to herself. “Tam could totally star in a reality show called ‘Celebrity Hoarders’.” They were there for hours and they still barely made a dent in it. “Guess I know what I’m doing next weekend.” Fun.

Felicity leaned back against the contoured headrest and closed her eyes as the heat of the tub seeped into her bones, chasing away the Gotham winter as the pulsing water jets soothed her tired muscles. She must have drifted off because the next thing she knew the jets abruptly shut off and there was a splash of water as someone pulled the plug. She inhaled sharply in an aborted yawn as she blinked her eyes open to see Bruce’s perturbed countenance glaring down at her.

“You do know that falling asleep in the tub is dangerous, right? Unless, of course, you want to drown?” He asked her with a scowl, his jacket tossed on the countertop near the sink and his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

“You have to die of something, right?” She said wearily as she yawned and sat upright, exposing her breasts to his gaze. “Not funny,” he told her sharply even though his eyes immediately locked onto her naked form which was still pink from the bath.

“Have you ever noticed that nothing is ever funny to you?” She said testily. It’s just as well, she thought, the water, despite the built in heater, had started to cool and her fingers were beyond prune- y. “Can you at least pass me a towel while you loom above me with that sour look on your face?” He reached over to the towel warmer and held it out as she stood up and wrapped it around her, humming in pleasure despite her irritation and exhaustion as warm and fuzzy rocked her world. “What time is it anyway? And why the hell are you here?”

His eyes were still wandering up and down her form, darkening slightly as she wrapped the towel around her breasts. He extended his hand to help her out of the tub, his eyes locking on her upper thighs where the towel parted as she stepped onto the floor, “Nearly 7:30,” he told her. “And I’m here because I had no idea where you were.”

She let go of his hand and stretched, arching her back and causing his eyes to leap from her legs back to her chest. “That late? Wow, I was in the tub for a while, huh?” She mused. “Guess I was past due for a nap after all.”

He ignored her comment, his jaw firming as he forced his eyes upwards, “I’ve been calling and texting you all afternoon. Where were you?”

“Helping Tam go through her storage units; why, what business is it of yours?” She asked tiredly as she walked into the bedroom and rummaged through the large dresser for a nightgown.
“Damn it,” he muttered, walking over to her and spinning her around to face him. “Everything you do is my business, Felicity. I was worried about you and I wanted to talk about what happened yesterday.”

“Whatever.” She disengaged her arms from his grip and reached for a long jersey cotton peignoir set then marched past him to the bathroom without saying a word.

“Where are you--?” She shut the door in his face and locked it, causing him to utter a filthy curse as he tried the knob. “Damn it, Felicity! You don’t get to shut me out just because you’re having a little snit, do you hear me?”

“‘Little snit’ my ass,” she muttered as she slipped the simple and plainly styled floor length cotton jersey chemise over her head and shimmied it into place until it floated around her ankles before slipping the matching robe over her shoulders. It wasn’t her warm and fuzzies but the penthouse was a lot warmer than her bungalow and, despite her sister’s cutting remarks about Donna Karan, the woman knew her way around a nightgown. Soft and silky with a modest V-neck, when paired with the matching robe it, like most of the designer’s lounge wear, felt like a soft warm hug against her skin. She walked over to the sink and grabbed the toothbrush she had used the night before to brush her teeth as she drowned out Bruce’s bitch and whine session from the other side of the door. When she was done, she wiped her mouth with the towel, tossed it into the hamper, before brushing her nearly dry hair into something that didn’t look like a rat’s nest, then made her way back to the bedroom.

Might as well get it over with, she thought to herself with a grimace.

“Goddamn it!” He cursed at the closed door, “I’m trying to have an adult--!” She opened the door and he stopped mid-sentence to stare at her.

“Do you mind?” She asked, indicating she’d like to move past him.

“Actually I do,” he scowled, finding his voice again but still stepping aside as she made her way back to the dresser. “We need to talk.”

Felicity grabbed a pair of thick black and gray boot socks from the drawer, “I’d really rather not,” she said as she walked over to sit on the bed so she could tug them on.

“What are you doing?” He asked her.

“Putting on socks.”

“Why?”

She let out an exasperated breath and glared up at him, “Because you apparently destroyed my favorite slippers when you trashed my house, my feet are cold, and I didn’t buy any to replace them, that’s why. So, unless you want to run out and buy me some, I’m stealing your socks; deal with it,” she said sarcastically. “Seriously, how the hell do you kill a pair of bunny slippers? Who breaks slippers?” She muttered. “Did you guys actually pull out the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch, or was it just pure dumb luck on your part?”

“The holy what?” Bruce asked in confusion.

“Oh come on!” She said in outrage. “You went to Oxford—in England! Monty Python and the Holy Grail, Bruce; get some pop culture already!”

“I mean, why are you dressed like that?” He asked, indicating her nightgown.
“Because I’m tired and I intend to take a nap if I’m going to be manning your coms tonight,” she told him with an edge of acerbity. “But first, I’m going to go into the kitchen to make a sandwich because I’m hungry; any more questions?” She rolled on the other sock, “The man has an Ivy League education, runs a multi-billion dollar corporation, hunts bad guys under the cover of darkness, and yet he can’t figure out why a person is wearing pajamas at night,” she muttered under her breath. “Oh, and he killed the Killer Bunnies and didn’t get the joke. I’m not getting over that shit anytime soon. Those were collectables, thank you very much.”

“There’s no food here,” he reminded her, ignoring her mumbled rant.

“I bought groceries,” she said testily as she wiggled her now toasty toes in her socks. His socks, she corrected herself mentally. Doesn’t matter, they were hers now. She decided to lay claim to them and anything else comfy looking in the drawers and closet including, but not limited to, his undershirts, boxers, thick wool boot socks, and dress shirts. “I figured I needed coffee and snacks if I’m going to have to deal with having you snarling in my ear all night long.”

“You’re still manning Watchtower tonight?” He asked in surprise.

“I just told you I was; why wouldn’t I?” She asked him with a frown.

He ignored the question. “If you’re hungry we can go out,” he offered, his expression softening slightly. “If you’re in the mood for French we can go downstairs to The Carousel; they always save me a table just in case.”

“I don’t want to go out and I’m not a big fan of eating and spinning at the same time even if I did want to go. I just want to eat something here and catch a few hours of sleep before I have to head down to the cave,” she told him.

“We can order in then. What do you want?” He asked her, pulling out his phone. “I’ll order for us both.”

“I already have a ton of stuff in the fridge; I bought enough groceries to last for a few days at least. Besides, don’t you have to go home to the manor and get some sleep before you go on patrol?” She asked him irritably.

“I have a spare suit of armor downstairs,” he told her, his eyes narrowing. “Why? Did you want me to leave?”

“Yes, actually I do.”

“You said you were helping me on coms tonight,” he said with a scowl as he put his phone back in his pocket.

“That doesn’t mean that I intend to have dinner with you or invite you to sleep with me,” she shot back.

“Who said I intended to sleep with you?” Bruce asked innocently.

“Please,” she snorted.

“Fine,” he said with a smirk. “And I suppose you put on that nightgown because it was the least sexiest piece of lingerie you could find.”

She looked down at her plain pink nightgown incredulously. She had tee-shirts that showed more skin. “Actually, yes,” she told him in a deadpan. “Everything else I bought is either crotchless or see-
“If you feel like modeling some of it, I have time,” he said with an amused grin.

She ignored him, “It’s a nightgown, Bruce; not an invitation, and a pretty plain one at that. I bought it because it was comfortable and long enough to keep my legs covered, not because it was sexy.”

“It’s not not sexy,” he said with a heated look as he stepped closer.

“You’d think an old flannel granny gown was sexy,” she said with an eye roll.

“True, especially if you were the one wearing it.” His gaze warmed up considerably as it roamed over her figure once again, “Or not wearing it; whatever the case may be. Doesn’t matter to me though, I’m easy; sexy or not, it all winds up on the floor eventually.”

“Not tonight it won’t,” she muttered as she tried to move past him towards the kitchen but he stopped her by taking her wrist and pulling her towards him. She glared at him, “I believe we’ve already had the manhandling discussion, have we not?”

“We have,” he tugged her until she was leaning against his chest, his hands moving to clasp her waist firmly as he looked down at her. “Unfortunately, I’m not a very good listener.” His hands slid from her waist to cup her backside through the thin robe, “I’m more of an actions speak louder than words kind of guy.”

“Well, until you improve in that particular area I suggest you let go of my ass and toddle along your merry way,” she told him crossly.

He smirked again, completely unaffected by her growing irritation with him. He brought his lips to her ear, the slight scruff of his five o’clock shadow causing her to shiver as it rubbed against her cheek, “Have I ever told you that there is nothing I find sexier than a woman, all warm and pink from the tub?” He breathed her in and growled, “By the way, you smell very nice, Baby.” He kissed the tender skin under her ear and nuzzled against her, his teeth grazing her neck and causing her to shiver again, “Practically edible in fact. What do you say we skip the sandwiches and just…” He nipped at her earlobe causing her to gasp involuntarily.

Despite her annoyance with him she found herself beginning to respond so she decided to fight fire with fire. She wrapped her arms around his neck and placed her own lips so close to his that there was barely a hairsbreadth between them. She allowed her eyelids to drop half-mast and lowered her voice to a sexy purr, “And have I ever told you…” her hands slid down and she gripped his loosened tie with her right hand as her left eased down his other arm to grip his elbow, her eyes traveling down his broad chest as she slowly licked her lips, “how very, very…good…” He inhaled sharply and she could feel his interest stir as his eyes darkened. She stepped even closer to him until their bodies were plastered against each other, her left leg moving between his as her right hooked behind his knee, “I’ve gotten at jujitsu?” And with that she thrust and spun his upper body away as her leg hit him at the back of the knee using his own body weight against him and forcing him to the ground.

Only two things prevented it from being a picture perfect takedown:

1. He still had his hands firmly on her ass.
2. He was, after all, Batman.

He went down hard but he took her down with him. She landed sprawled against his chest, her thighs straddling his as he hit the bedroom floor. He immediately rolled them over until he was on top cradled between her thighs as the hem of her gown rode up her legs, his hands pinning hers through.”
above her head. He grinned, grinding his now very firm erection against her center and causing her
to gasp despite herself, “I was actually planning on talking a bit but if you want to skip that part it’s
fine by me.”

“Not everything can be solved by sex, Bruce,” she told him despite the fact that she could feel her
body responding to him.

“No, it can’t,” he said, releasing her wrists, one hand tugging open her robe so he could slide his
other one down her arm cup her breast. His eyes locked onto her hardened nipples that were obvious
through the thin material and his thumb teased the stiffened peak as he bent his head to brush his lips
against hers, “but it is good at releasing tension.”

She whimpered as his lips slanted against hers, his tongue tasting her deeply. The hand not occupied
with her breast reached down to grasp her nightgown and haul it further upwards leaving her thighs
bare. His lips left hers and trailed kisses along her cheekbone until he captured her earlobe between
his teeth and teased her with his tongue and mouth. She cried out and arched against him causing
him to chuckle darkly.

His lips blazed a fiery trail downwards to lick and suck at her neck, causing her to gasp. He lifted his
head to gaze down at her face now flushed with passion, “The bed’s right there but if you’re good
with the floor then so am I,” he said in a low rumble.

“I’m still mad at you,” she told him with a huff of frustration.

“I’m still pretty pissed at you myself; doesn’t mean we can’t have—what did your sister call it?” He
quirked a smile, “Oh yes, angry revenge sex.”

“No condoms, remember?” She pointed out.

“Depo shot,” he threw back, his lips tasting hers again before pulling back slightly, “Besides, we’re
getting married anyway and I thought we agreed that kids were a sooner rather than later thing?”

She snorted, “So you are trying to knock me up just so I’ll marry you.”

“Is that what it would take to get us to that point?” He asked her lightly but there was a hint of
uneasiness in his gaze as he looked at her.

“Bruce…” she exhaled.

“I love you,” he told her, the humor fading from his expression and he cupped her cheek, his other
hand brushing the mess of curls from her face. “I’m in love with you. I want to marry you but I also
want to keep you safe. Why can’t you see that?”

“If you love me then you have to start believing that I can take care of myself,” she told him with a
grimace. “That I not only know what I’m doing, but that this is something I have to do, with or
without your help.”

His jaw squared stubbornly, “I’m not going to apologize for wanting to keep you safe;”

“And I’m not going to apologize for doing what needs to be done,” she shot back.

He scowled, “Fine.”

“Fine,” she agreed.
He looked down at her, his jaw set, “Angry revenge sex it is then.” His mouth crashed down on hers as he sank his fingers into her hair. His tongue swept through her mouth as he tasted her before pulling away to get to his feet and hauling her upright. Before she could protest he swept her up in a bridal carry then tossed her onto the bed causing her to bounce with an undignified squeak. He chuckled as he began to tug off his clothes, allowing them to fall to the floor.

“Damn it!” She scowled as she watched him quickly shed his clothing. “First off, I am not having sex with you; angry or otherwise! Secondly, I’m starving. I haven’t eaten all day.”

“If you’re hungry I have something you can put in your mouth,” he said with a filthy grin.

She looked at him, her jaw dropping in shock. “Um…huh?”

His smile broadened, “Unless, of course, you aren’t up to the challenge?” He teased as he tugged off his pants and underwear before stripping off his socks and climbing into the bed beside her.

“I’ve never…um,” she looked down at his very happy soldier and swallowed nervously.

He looked at her, amusement dancing in his eyes, “Like I said, if you’re not up to the challenge, that’s fine.”

“Challenge my ass,” she scoffed huffily while eyeing his erection apprehensively.

“Scared?” He asked with a smirk as he cupped her cheek in his palm and began kissing her deeply. “That’s okay, Baby; I’m sure we can make do.”

“I’m not scared,” she said weakly as he lowered her head onto the pillow, licking and sucking his way down her neck while reaching down to tug his socks off her feet and toss them on the floor.

“Sure you aren’t,” he teased as he moved on top of her to grind himself into her center.

“You think you know everything but you don’t, you know; you’re not nearly as impressive as you think you are,” she complained, biting her bottom lip as he palmed her breast and began to tug at her nipple. “Plus, now my feet are cold again!”

“Hmm, I’ll keep you warm,” he promised as he sucked and nibbled his way down her neck. “As for me being impressive, I don’t know about that, but I always was a bit precocious. Case in point,” he said, grinding his hips into hers again and causing her to gasp.

“I can see that,” she said breathlessly. “You know, most men need a pill for that sort of thing at your age.”

He stopped and pulled away slightly so he could look at her, his eyebrow raised, “Is that so?”

She glanced around the room, “Of course, since we’re not soaking in a couple of tubs in the middle of a field watching the sunset I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“I may not be some fresh-faced boy but I’m sure you’ll find me more than adequate,” he told her as he removed her robe, slipping it off her shoulders, then hauled her gown over her head to toss it away carelessly. “See, like I said; it all winds up on the floor eventually.” His hand moved between her thighs to cup her sex. She gasped and his mouth covered hers, swallowing her moan as his
fingers dipped inside of her center. His thumb rubbed at the sensitive bundle of nerves as his fingers curled inside her. He pulled away from the kiss and watched as her eyes fluttered closed, her cheeks now flushed with passion rather than anger. “You’re wet for me, Felicity.” His fingers moved deeper inside of her causing her to bite her lip and squirm in pleasure, “Last chance to prove me wrong; are you up for the challenge or not?”

Goddamn it! Her eyes opened at that and she pushed him off of her and onto his back, “You want angry revenge sex; I’ll show you angry revenge sex!”

“Do your worst, Baby,” he invited with a chuckle. He lay back, getting himself comfortable against the pillows, as he waited to see what she’d do.

Giving him one last defiant look she gathered her robe and tossed it onto the end of the bed then brought her mouth to his chest and ran her tongue over his nipple before tugging it gently with her teeth, one hand curling around his shoulder and the other wrapping around his rock hard erection. He inhaled sharply and thrust up in her hand, his eyes closing as her mouth wandered down his chest. Determined to regain the upper hand, she worked her way down to his abs, her tongue running over his stomach before going even lower, enjoying the sounds he made as she stroked her fingers up and down his shaft. Her body slid down his until she was face to face with his erection and then she stopped.

He glanced down to see her pausing at his erection uncertainly. “Well,” he prompted.

“I’m thinking,” she muttered, looking at it a bit askance.

“What’s the problem exactly; maybe I can offer a few helpful hints?” he said, his voice a mixture of husky arousal and laughter.

He was kidding but…“I read a book about this once—well, twice; two books. Tam gave me one and I bought the other one on Amazon. Anyway,” she swallowed, staring at his twitching cock, “reading is one thing and actually putting it into practice is another,” she said ruefully. “Up until this point it’s all been academic and, it’s not that I’m scared or anything, it’s just a…logistics thing…” She took another second’s pause.

“Logistics?” He repeated, his dark blue eyes twinkling with merriment.

She looked up at him, “You’d be surprised. There’s this whole coordinated hand to mouth…” His lips twitched upwards in amusement and she grimaced, “Okay, fine; I realize you’ve probably done this lots of times but being the person on the receiving end of things is a lot different than being the person on this end!”

“I think you might be overthinking it,” he told her with a poorly concealed smirk.

“Hey, this stuff is pretty complicated, okay? There’s lots of…things going on and—” She scowled. “Look, have you ever given one of these before?”

“Can’t say that I have,” he said honestly.

“Right, then just give me a minute to come up with a game plan here,” she told him gruffly.

“Baby, if you don’t want to do it, that’s fine,” he told her with another sexy chuckle. “I was just teasing you. It’s not really that important to me. We can just skip it and move on to other things,” he said with another devilish look.

“No, I can do it,” she said determinately. At this point it really was a challenge; there’s no way she
was going to wuss out now. She took another centering breath and began to mutter, “Okay, hands, mouth, tongue, and watch the teeth…”

“Please; especially the last part,” Bruce told her, folding his hands behind his head and laughing quietly as he looked down at her antics.

“I’ve got this; I can do it,” she told herself ignoring him. She squared her shoulders, dug deep and, taking him firmly in hand, gently pulled down his foreskin and placed her tongue on the underside of his glans, licking hesitantly before taking him into her mouth.

Bruce’s hands left the pillow and clutched the sheets beside him as he let out a low moan, a look of intense pleasure filling his expression as the heat of her mouth surrounded him and pulled him inside. She licked and sucked at him, her tongue playing with the various textures and slipping around his glans and between his shaft and foreskin, her small hands running up and down his shaft in varying rhythms, squeezing and pulling as her mouth bobbed up and down.

She pulled away with a gasp, catching her breath, “That’s a lot harder than I thought it would be.” He began to snicker again despite his highly aroused state and she muttered, “Oh, shut up,” before taking him in her mouth again and redoubling her efforts.

A not unpleasant but wholly unexpected salty taste hit her tongue as he began to grow larger in her mouth. She pulled away, watching in fascination as a pearly drop of pre-ejaculate appeared at the tip of his erection. She tentatively tasted it then hummed in pleasure before going down on him again with renewed vigor, her own excitement growing as she heard him groan and pant due to her efforts. As she worked on him, her hands began pulling at his shaft in a slightly twisting motion that had him clenching his jaw within minutes as he fisted the sheets violently to stop himself from grabbing her head and pulling her against him. “Felicity,” he gasped.

“Oh no, you don’t,” he said. “My turn,” he hauled her up his body and kissed her deeply before flipping her onto her back and moved downwards, taking a moment to suck one of her nipples into his mouth, then further down until he was between her thighs. He buried his face in her lap, his mouth finding her center and began licking and sucking at the sensitive nub of her clit as his fingers entered and stretched her.

She cried out as he flicked his tongue against her, feeling her flesh grow hot and fragrant as a result of his ministrations. She panted and wiggled against him as his fingers began to saw in and out of her rapidly. She felt herself grow wet and slick as he took the tiny ball of flesh in his mouth and sucked
gently, keeping up a gentle friction with his fingers and tongue. She began to babble incoherently with words of passion and pleasure, her body taut, then shuddered and cried out, her entire body flushing pink. He wiped his mouth on the bunched up sheets that surrounded them then moved up her body until he was between her thighs, thrusting inside of her as he took her mouth again in a kiss.

She gasped sharply at his sudden intrusion and began to whimper as his hips drove into her faster and faster. “God,” he whispered in a prayer as he felt her tighten around him. He pulled her thighs up around his hips and pushed as deep inside her as he could go. Over and over he surged inside of her, his belly tightening as he desperately held off his orgasm even though he was more than halfway there before entering her. He felt his desire mount and build and he dug his toes into the mattress. She shifted her hips unexpectedly, changing the angle slightly, and causing them both to moan in sensual gratification. Her back arched off the bed, driving him further inside her, as she began to quiver through her second orgasm, her nails digging into his back as warm wet heat surrounded him. She cried out again and began to sob in pleasure as he finally allowed himself to let go, spilling his seed inside of her with another call to the heavens. His eyes shut tight, the exaltation of their union causing his head to swim as he finally gave in to his own body’s demands for release.

He shuddered in the aftermath, warm lethargy seeping into his muscles as he leaned heavily against her. He lifted his head to pull her into a tender kiss when he heard her mutter against his lips, “I’m still hungry.”

He laughed breathlessly against the soft skin of her neck and shoulder, his lungs still struggling slightly for breath, “Baby, whatever happens; never change.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” she told him as she ran her hands down his back. “Now are you going to let me eat something or what?”

He rolled off of her and fell against the mattress bonelessly, “I could say so many things right now.” He tugged her into his arms and kissed her tenderly before settling her into his side.

She gave him a disgruntled look as she tugged on his chest hair, “Three words, Bruce: low blood sugar.”

He covered her hand with his own and gave her a crooked smile, “We could go into the kitchen and see what you bought or…”

“Or?” She asked. “And, by the way, ‘or’ better have something to do with food.”

“I could order us something in and we could take a nap until it gets here,” he suggested.

She rolled her eyes at him and slipped out of bed to pad towards the bathroom, “Fine, but no sushi; I’ve had that twice already this week. And nothing from Carousel! I hate to break it to you but, while the view is great, the food in that restaurant of yours doesn’t live up to the hype.”

“For your information, Carousel just got its third Michelin star but if you don’t want French then what are you in the mood for?” He asked as he reached for his pants so he could retrieve his phone. “Other than the obvious of course,” he said with a hint of smug satisfaction.

“Conceited much?” She turned on the taps to the tub and grabbed a washcloth before climbing inside and washing herself, “I don’t know; something different.”

“Something different,” she heard him mutter as he walked into the bathroom in all his naked glory. “El Salvadorian or Georgian?”

“El Salvadorian is just Mexican with more beef dishes and higher prices,” she told him as he sat on
the edge of the tub.

“ODA House it is then,” he said dialing. “What do you want?”

“Everything but the liver and onions and no lamb,” she said.

“Okay,” he said with a bemused look. “Good thing I’m rich or I have a feeling you’d eat me out of house and home in no time.”

“Are you complaining?” She asked with an arched eyebrow as she lay back in the steaming water, her nakedness on full display. She put aside the washcloth to trail her fingers from between her thighs to across her stomach before ghosting over her breasts.

“Nope,” he said with glittering eyes before hanging up the phone abruptly, casting it aside, and climbing in behind her. “In fact, seeing how you look with your mouth full is my new favorite pastime.”

It took a while before they were able to place their order and, while they didn’t quite order the entire menu, they did order a lot. Of course, by then they’d both worked up a healthy appetite. After snoozing for an hour or so, security called up to let them know their food had arrived. Bruce slipped on a pair of soft flannel lounge pants and a tee shirt to answer the door as Felicity put her nightgown back on and helped him take the food into the kitchen after he paid the delivery guy who had been escorted up.

He ordered them two appetizers, one hot and one cold. The first was a cold salad called Pkhali, a traditional Georgian dish consisting of chopped and minced vegetables including eggplant, spinach, leeks, beans, and beets dressed with vinegar, onions, garlic, and herbs then sprinkled with pomegranate seeds. The hot appetizer was called Tolma which was basically spicy meatballs made from ground beef and pork, wrapped then cooked in grape leaves, and served with a yogurt sauce that was flavored with garlic, tarragon, and mint. He also ordered them three types of Mtsvadi, or shish kebob, an assortment of Georgian cheeses, and homemade bread called Shoti with Napoleoni puffed pastries for dessert.

They sat around the kitchen table laughing and feeding each other while exchanging intimate touches and stealing the odd kiss. It was the happiest she’d been in a while even though it was fairly obvious that they were both avoiding the subject that had started the fight to begin with. She was pretty sure Bruce thought she had given up on her idea to work for the OO but, the truth was, she was more determined than ever to get this done so she could know, once and for all, if her world was going to come crashing down around her.

Despite herself, she found herself wanting this kind of domestic bliss with him. The penthouse, even though it was half empty and knowing that they still had a long way to go before she could ever see settling down with him, had started to feel like a home; a real home. She wanted that; more than anything, and she’d do whatever she had to do to make that happen even if it meant angering Bruce in the short term or risking her life by going ahead with her plans.

Later, after the food had been eaten and the leftovers cleared away, she snuggled up against him with his arm wrapped around her side and slept in the bed he referred to as ‘theirs’, desperately trying not to worry about the storm yet to come.
“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Diggle called up to Luke through the access panel of the freight elevator, passing him another box of tools. “You’ve been up there a while now; need some help?”

“Thanks man, but I got it,” Luke told him. “I’m an engineer; if it’s mechanical, I can fix it. Besides, stuff like this bugs me; at this point it’s a grudge match between me and this piece of shit death trap of yours.”

“I hear you,” Dig said. “Felicity’s the same way whenever she sees someone banging on the keyboard or whacking it because they can’t get it to do right.”

“Hurts her soul, right?”

“You got it,” Dig grinned. “Just let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“I’m good!”

He wandered over to where Oliver was supervising Roy and Tim’s sparring session.

“How are our other guests doing?” Oliver asked him quietly as he walked up, his eyes never leaving the action on the mats.

“Luke says he’s got the elevator repairs almost wrapped up and, according to Barbara, she’s in ‘Baby Heaven’ right now.” He dipped his head towards Oliver’s ear with a grin, “I’ve got to say that, despite the bumpy start, I kind of like having other masks in the foundry. Shit’s getting done.”

“I know what you mean,” Oliver told him with a slightly amused quirk of his lips.

After a quick introduction followed by some posturing on the part of Roy, the two men had decided to test each other on the mats. At first, despite the other man’s extensive experience, Dig had been a bit nervous by the idea of him getting physical with Roy. Even after he’d been given the Mirakuru anti-serum, it was still difficult for him to control his sudden rages. He’d hurt both of them a few times while sparring and he wasn’t sure if Tim really understood what he was in for.

That is until he watched them go at it.

Roy had yet to land a single blow while Tim was wiping the floor with him. Dig watched as Roy lunged only to have Tim flip into the air in an impressive act of acrobatics to land softly on the mats behind him. He immediately used his Bo Staff to sweep his opponent’s legs out from under him, causing Roy to land hard on his side with a grunt.

“You okay, man?” He asked as he circled him, his expression still as untroubled as always. “We can stop if you’re tired.”

“I’m not tired,” Roy growled before casting off his staff, leaping to his feet, and rushing Tim like a bull to a matador’s cape.

Tim just stood there, seemingly unconcerned, until the very last second when he nimbly stepped aside and landed a hard knock with his staff to the back of Roy’s head causing him to flounder and sprawl face first onto the mat.

“Ouch,” Tim said shaking his head as he circled him again. “That looked kind of painful; are you sure you don’t need a break?”

“I’ll break you, you mother--!” Roy wiped the blood out from under his nose with his hand and
turned on Tim with a nearly feral growl, his whole body trembling with rage. He dove at Tim again only to land with another painful, “Oomph!”

“Like I said, dude; it’s just the first day. We have time,” Tim said with a yawn as he spun his bo between his fingers like a majorette spinning a baton. “Besides, I’m only up to half speed myself. We should try this again tomorrow when I’m fresher and can really kick your ass into shape.”

“If anyone is kicking anybody’s ass, it’ll be me!” Roy said emphatically even as blood and sweat rolled off his face to drip on the mats while Tim still had yet to break a sweat.

“You know, I like you Roy; you never say die even when it’s pretty obvious that you’re completely outclassed,” Tim said with a grin. “Guess that either makes you persistent or really, really stupid.”

“Think it’s about time we put a stop to this for tonight or what?” Dig asked just as Roy made another inhuman growl and lunged for Tim’s throat only to have the other man whack him hard on the backside causing him to yelp in pain.

“Are you kidding?” Oliver said, his lips upturned in a look of amusement. “This is the most fun I’ve had in months.”

“This is so unfair, man; seriously,” Tim said shaking his head as Roy struggled to his feet. “You’re really making me feel bad now. Baby told us you were some kind of bad-ass tough guy so I was expecting a challenge but now I’m starting to feel like a schoolyard bully beating up on the poor runty kid. If I had known you were an amateur with virtually no training…”

“If you want to see what I can do then throw down that staff of yours and come at me with your fists!” Roy spat out, the adrenaline causing his hands to shake even more now, a fact that was beginning to really worry Dig.

“Okay,” Tim said tossing away his staff and standing in front of him, a curious expression on his face. “Show me what you got, tough guy.”

Roy sprang into action, his powerful legs propelling him toward Tim like a rocket, but the other man merely stepped slightly again to the side and clocked him with his fist before grabbing his wrist and, in a text book example of kotegaeshi, locked onto it while executing a block, then leapt to Roy’s other side, pulling him along and twirling as though they were dancing partners, then twisted his arm behind his back taking him down, all the while using the other man’s own momentum and strength against him. As Roy landed hard face first on the mat, Tim pinned his arm behind him painfully and stuck a hard knee in his back.

“Are you going to tap out, or what?” Tim asked him, “Don’t make me have to break your arm, bro.” He twisted his arm further in emphasis causing Roy to cry out in pain.

A thunderous look stole over Roy’s face before he slapped the mat forcefully three times signaling he was done.

Despite his tap out, Tim didn’t release his hold, “Now, I’m willing to let you go, Roy, but if you try to land a cheap shot on me I’m going to have to stop playing with you and start taking this fight seriously. I’ve been really patient so far, but if you piss me off we’re going to have a problem. Are we going to have a problem?” He twisted his arm again and jammed his thumb in the middle of his hand to put pressure on a nerve cluster that Dig knew from experience would make Roy feel like he was being jolted by a Taser as pain shot up from his arm to deep into the sympathetic nerves of his thoracic spine.
Roy gritted his teeth and grunted, his eyes watering slightly, “We’re good! I quit!”

Tim released him and quickly stepped back, crossing his arms over his chest in a seemingly casual pose as he watched Roy struggle back to his feet, rubbing his arm and hand as he did so, “You want to grab something to drink before we begin round two?”

Roy let out a frustrated breath before looking up at Tim, a grudging look of respect crossing his features, “Yeah.” He followed him over to where Dig and Oliver were standing and handily caught the bottle of water Tim tossed his way. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Tim said, grinning at him like they were just a couple of guy’s hanging out much to Diggle’s amusement.

“That was a nice move out there,” he told him.

“Yeah, learned it when I was ten my first week in the Batcave,” Tim told him, twisting off the cap to his water and taking a drink.

“Wayne had you learning Aikido at ten years old?” Dig asked in surprise.

“ Heck, he had Dick learning it even younger than that, right Barbara?” He called out.

“Yeah, but Dick had a bit of a head start on you since he came from circus folk and you grew up a rich snot from Gotham Heights,” she said from where she was at the LAIR terminal.

“Who’s Dick?” Roy asked a little breathlessly as he sat down on the mats in front of them.

“Dick Grayson, right? Wayne’s other kid?” Dig asked.

Tim nodded and Roy frowned, “If you guys are brothers then why isn’t he a Wayne, too?”

“Long story,” Tim said.

“I’ll say,” Barbara snorted from across the room.

Tim smirked in her direction before turning to his companions, “Bruce adopted Dick when he was in his early twenties so their relationship was always more of a brother thing and Dick wanted to keep his last name to honor his parents.”

“What about you?” Roy asked curiously.

“What about me?” Tim asked.

“I mean, are you Bruce’s real kid or what?”

Barbara flinched and turned her wheelchair to face them, “Nice. Queen, what the hell have you been teaching this street rat of yours? Obviously it wasn’t manners.”

Oliver actually looked pained at that, “Roy…” he said warningly.

“What?” Roy asked. “I just meant that he looks like he could be his real kid, is all.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘biological’ not ‘real’, Roy,” Dig told him while shaking his head in exasperation.

“Sorry,” he said in consternation. “No offense.”
“None taken,” Tim told him. “The answer is no, Bruce isn’t my ‘real’ bio-dad. He adopted me after my parent’s died just like he did with all the rest of his kids. You’re not the first person to make that comment though; we do look a bit alike but that’s because, according to Alfred, my mom and Bruce were like fifth cousins once removed or something.”

“How many kids does he have?” Roy asked.

“Right now? Just me and Dick,” Tim said, his voice taking on a slightly hollow note.

“I’d heard something about Wayne losing a child a few years ago,” Oliver said quietly. “Damian? I’m sorry for your loss.”

Tim’s lips quirked upwards in a humorless smile, his eyes flat and cool, “Yeah, well, we’ve taken on a lot of losses the last few years.”

“Shit, man; we know what that’s like for sure,” Roy snorted.

Tim looked at him curiously but before he could say anything Luke called out from the elevator shaft, “Finally!” The other man exclaimed as he jumped down out of the top of the elevator, tool box in hand. “Now you guys have an elevator that actually works.” He wandered over to where the rest of them were standing after putting the toolbox back near the workstation. “Hey, bro! Toss me a water.”

“Here,” Tim said, reaching into the cooler and throwing it to him.

“Thanks for fixing that for us; I appreciate it,” Oliver said, giving him the nod.


Oliver nodded, “You feel like coming along?”

“Depends on whether or not you can make it interesting for me,” Luke grinned, flexing his fingers in the temporary brace. “I could use a little physical therapy.”

Dig looked at his injured appendage doubtfully, “You sure your arm can handle it?”

“My armor has an interior ‘skin’ that not only keeps track of my vital signs but acts as a compression brace if I break a bone. It’ll be just like wearing a cast but I’ll have full movement,” he told him. “Hell, it even injects a pain reliever if it senses an injury.”

“Really?” Oliver asked, his interest peaked, “What else can it do?”

Luke opened his mouth to speak but this time Tim cut him off. “Dude, if you get him started on that armor of his, we’ll be here all night.”

“You’re just jealous because my armor actually does shit and all yours does is make you look like you’re hung which we all know is a lie,” Luke shot back.

“That’s not what your sister told me last night,” Tim returned.

“To be fair, Tam tells that to a lot of people,” Barbara called out from the workstation.

Everyone looked over at Barbara and Roy grinned, “Damn; triple burn!” He crowed, “She just insulted your girlfriend, his sister, and your dick in one go!”

“What can I say, I’m talented,” Barbara said as she tapped away. She wheeled around until she was
facing all of them. “You ladies can compare the size of your codpieces later; right now I have Triad activity on the docks. You want to go handle it or should I just throw the cops a bone?”

“How much activity?” Oliver asked, striding over to join her at the workstation followed by the rest of them.

“A lot,” Barbara said, turning around to bring up CCTV footage on the monitors. “Baby’s system has me patched into the security feeds in the warehouse district. I’m counting at least a couple of dozen inside and movement around the harbor; maybe thirty to thirty-five heavily armed gangbangers altogether.”

“That looks like a major deal going down,” Dig said, observing the feeds with a practiced eye.

“That looks like China White and Alberto Vargas,” Oliver said, pointing them out.

“The Peruvians are working with the Triads?” Dig said, looking at him sharply. “That could be where the sudden influx of cocaine Lance was talking about is coming from. Now that the Italians are out, they need someone to move their product.”

“Let’s suit up,” Oliver said, “Barbara, did Felicity give you the 411 on Lance?”

“I already have a direct patch into his smartphone,” she told him. “You want me to give him a heads up?”

“Tell him what we have and make sure he knows we’re going in. Tell him to have his guys standing by but give us time to do some recon before he sends in SWAT then patch him in on our coms. Felicity gave him his own earpiece a while back. We don’t want our guys caught in a gunfight and we certainly don’t want any of his men getting hurt,” He turned to the rest of the men, “If you guys want to come, we could use the help.”

“I’m with you, man,” Luke said, already reaching for his duffle to take out his armor.

“Sounds like fun; you coming Roy?” Tim asked, already pulling his shirt over his head and heading for his own bag.

“Is that cool?” He asked Oliver hesitantly.

Oliver sighed and glanced over at Tim, “He’s the guy training you so if he thinks you can handle it, fine. We’ll need as many feet on the ground as we can get.”

“We got this,” Tim said confidently as he unzipped his jeans, tossing them in a pile on the mats as he pulled on his armor. “Just follow my lead and we’ll be fine.”

“You know, we do have a changing area in the back,” Dig said, glancing at Barbara uncomfortably as the men stripped down to their underwear.

“Oh please,” Barbara snorted as she glanced over at them. “I appreciate the gentleman routine but I’ve been sharing space with these two for so long that I’ve seen everything they’ve got and then some. I even shared a bathroom with that one over there,” she hitched a thumb at Tim. “Trust me, after seeing what he gets up to in the shower, nothing shocks me.”

“Hey!” Tim said, looking up from where he was zipping up his pants. “If you knocked once in a while you wouldn’t have caught me during my, um, private business in the first place!” Roy looked at him askance and Tim flushed, “Tam was out of town and I was lonely.”
“Whatever, dude,” Roy said, getting up to grab his own red leathers and heading to the bathroom, obviously not as willing to give Barbara a free show.

“Tim and Luke have комs systems already built into their armor but I’ve patched the frequency into LAIR so you guys will be connected.” She pulled the ear buds out of their case and handed them to Dig and Oliver who were already suited up and ready for business. “Before Luke heads out of town you might want to get together with him and see if he can come up with some mock ups for new suits for you guys.” She looked over Oliver’s green leather and Diggle’s tactical gear, both of which emphasized their heavily muscled physiques. “Not that you two aren’t yummy with a spoon as it is, but I’m pretty sure Bruce’s gadget hook up could get you something that might help keep any new scars and bullet holes to a minimum.”

“Thanks, we might have to do that,” Oliver said, eyeing Luke and Tim’s suits. Roy emerged in the red version of Oliver’s hood and he tossed him his ear bud. “Follow Tim’s lead but if I tell you to fall back you fall back, got it?”

“Got it,” Roy said, putting it in his ear.

At that moment the door to the Foundry opened and Sara walked in, her own duffle slung over one arm, “Hey handsome!” She said as she headed down the stairs and walked towards the group. “You sure do know how to fill out that suit of yours!”

“Sara…?” Oliver said, looking up in surprise at her intimate tone. He moved to intercept her but, to his and Diggle’s surprise, she walked past them and right up to Luke before laying a very enthusiastic lip lock on him…

…that he, in turn, responded to with equal enthusiasm.

“Damn girl,” Luke said appreciatively when they broke apart, his large hands cupping her waist possessively. “You sure do know how to make an entrance.”

“Miss me?” She grinned.

“You know it,” he smiled back.

She loosened her hold on him and glanced around the room. “Looks like you guys are gearing up for some action,” she said eyeing all of them. “Mind if I tag along?”

“Sure,” Luke said, not even waiting for Oliver to speak. Although, to be fair, he didn’t look like he was quite capable of it at the moment, Dig thought as he observed his partner’s shocked countenance. “I’m looking forward to seeing you in action,” Luke continued in an intimate timbre.

“Sweetie, I thought you saw plenty of action from me last night,” she winked at him before heading for the bathroom. “Hey guys!” She said waving at the rest of them. “Be ready in a sec; you can brief me on the way.”

Roy turned to Oliver with a pitying look, “Dude, I thought my love life was in the crapper but, damn; that was harsh.”

“Shut up, Roy,” Oliver growled right before heading out, bow in hand.

She took a sip of her coffee as she watched Bruce quickly put on his armor from her place behind the workstation, “Barring any unforeseen baddies, is it okay if we try to make an early night of it
tonight? Tomorrow’s going to be a long day and I didn’t exactly get the nap I’d planned on earlier.”

“I seem to recall that you enjoyed that little interruption in sleep just as much as I did,” he said with an erotic overtone, now fully dressed in his armor with the exception of his cape and cowl.

“Hey, no flirting in the FelicityCave,” she told him.

“Since when?” He asked as he put on his cape and adjusted the cowl before coming up to her and leaning down so their mouths were nearly touching. “I don’t recall that particular rule.”

She snorted at him then reached up to kiss him gently. When she pulled away she fixed him with a stern eye, “I mean it, Bruce; barring any unforeseen crap-storms, we cut this off by three, four at the latest.”

“Fine,” he said, although he didn’t sound overly enthusiastic about the idea. “We can catch a few more hours of sleep and then go out to breakfast before Zander and his crew get here in the morning.”

“You’re coming back here?” She said, feigning surprise.

“Of course I am,” his eyes narrowed on her in suspicion. “Why? Is there some reason you don’t want me here?”

“No, I’m just surprised that you’d rather spend all morning here looking at fabric swatches when I know you’ve probably got back to back meetings scheduled. I always thought you and Dad had department head meetings on Tuesdays.”

“I think I can spare a few hours,” he said, his voice still laden with doubt. “You don’t mind me being here, do you?”

“No,” she said off-handedly, stifling a feigned yawn that became real about halfway through. She blinked her eyes fuzzily, “I just kind of wish I’d known you were going to be here. Tam’s coming over and she’s basically going to spend the entire day steamrolling over absolutely everyone. I could have spared myself the aggravation and not invited her if I had known you’d be here as backup in case Sabine shows up again.”

“You invited Tam over?” He asked, his mouth turning down in confusion.

“Why wouldn’t I? She speaks fluent decorator,” she told him. “The woman redecorates her entire apartment every other week so I figured that if Cruella De Vil came back for the sequel she could bitch slap her down with attitude instead of the way I had planned to which would have involved you bailing me out of jail later. I hope you’re not mad that I invited her to spend time with us, are you?”

“No, of course not,” Bruce said quickly, the confusion in his expression obvious even under his cowl. “That was actually pretty good thinking on your part.”

Time to go in for the kill, she thought. She hated to do it but she needed him to want to stay away today and not arouse any more suspicion. “By the way,” she said slowly, making sure to cringe a bit. “There’s something I need to tell you and there’s a good chance you’re not going to like it.”

His jaw squared and his eyes glittered as he sensed his suspicions were about to be justified, “What?”

She sighed and pulled a face as though struggling with her words, “Okay, here’s the thing; yesterday I might have let slip that you asked me to marry you and now Tam has decided that she’s in charge
of the entire thing.” She looked up quickly, “I’m sorry! I know you haven’t even talked to my dad yet and that we were still just in the ‘what if’ stage, but…” She bit her lip, “Okay, I screwed up, I know, and I really tried to fix it, I did, but…um, there’s more.”

“More?” He repeated in disbelief.

“Yeah,” she cringed again. “In order to get her to agree to keep everything quiet I might have agreed to let her drag me to meet a wedding planner later—not in a serious way! Just, you know, in a casual kind of ‘I might be getting married but I don’t want to put down any deposits quite yet’ way.” She looked at him through a cascade of dark eyelashes, “Are you mad? You’re mad; I can cancel it, no problem! I told her it was a bad idea anyway.”

“You told your sister we’re getting married?” He asked in astonishment as if that was the last thing he expected her to say.

“She dragged it out of me, okay?” She said in contrived consternation. “When I left her yesterday she was going to the store to buy up every bridal magazine she could get ahold of and all Sara could talk about on the way to the airport was that she, Barbara, and Tam were going to be bridesmaids…” She blanched again, “Oh yeah, Barbara probably knows too since Sara is already in Starling and has probably told her by now.” She bit her lip, “Oh, and I also might have told Tim.”

“You told Tim, Barbara, Tam, and Sara that we were getting married?” He echoed incredulously.

“I did, yeah,” she said apologetically. “It just kind of…popped out…at various intervals…repeatedly and apparently indiscriminately. Wow, I really suck at keeping things quiet, huh?”

He stood there in silence, not saying a word, his gaze slightly vacant as he seemed to consider this new turn of events carefully.

“At least I haven’t told Luke, Dad, or Peggy,” she said with forced cheer then allowed her face to fall. “Although, chances are, Luke probably knows by now, too, so…” She cleared her throat, “Say something, okay? You’re kind of freaking me out here.” She took a steadying breath, “Look, if you want to back out of it, I understand. I’ll just call Tam, Sara and Tim and tell them to forget I said anything. I mean, really, it’s too soon to even be talking about--”

“No,” Bruce said quickly. He took off his cowl, tossing it on the desk, and knelt by her chair, turning her to face him. He looked her in the eyes searchingly, “I’m just surprised; you seemed a bit reluctant and… I just wasn’t expecting you to still be on board with this after our fight the other day.”

God, she was starting to feel really guilty for this but it had to be done. She laid her hand on his cheek softly, “It was just a fight, Bruce. People have fights; it doesn’t mean they stop loving each other. If you want to know the truth, then, yeah, you’re right; I still am a little unsure about all this. I mean, marriage is a big step and I don’t think we should rush in and head to Vegas tomorrow, and I definitely know that I shouldn’t have blurted it out like that. But things with Tam tend to snowball, you know? Plus, Sara was in the room so it’s not like I was flitting around like a bee and pollinating our mutual social circle with hot gossip; it just happened. Well, Tim was, you know, a little gossipy but I was mad at you and…” she grimaced. She didn’t have to pretend this next part because it was true, “Yesterday Tam asked me if I loved you and then she asked me if you felt the same way so I told her about what we talked about; marriage, kids, the whole nine yards. I couldn’t help it. And Tim, well, I thought he was going to try to talk me out of it but then he basically gave us his blessing and said that we’ve always belonged to each other. He even said he was happy that I was going to be his step-mom, which is really weird because if he marries Tam then our family tree is going to look totally screwed up.” His lips twitched upwards in response and she offered him a tender look, “Even though I was still mad at you I guess… I don’t know.” She gave him a half-smile and
scrunch her nose, “It was a pretty stupid slip, huh?”

“No,” he said quietly, leaning in to kiss her before rubbing his forehead on hers and closing his eyes. “No, Tim was absolutely right; we do belong together. We’ve always belonged together and the only thing I’m upset about is the fact that we should have done this a lot sooner.”

“Are you sure?” She asked quietly. “I know we were planning on waiting a while, try dating first, but now that Tim knows it’s just a matter of time before he slips up and says something to Luke, and if Luke finds out then he’ll spill the beans to dad just to be an ass, and you just know my dad is going to hit the roof, not to mention what Peggy Ann will do.”

“Shit.” He leaned back and grimaced. “You’re right, Luke is going to call Lucius the minute he finds out. Damn it.”

She pushed back her chair and grabbed her phone, “Wait, let me call Tim and--!”

He placed his hand over the phone and took it away from her, setting it back down on the workstation, “No, what’s done is done.” He looked at her and smiled softly before kissing her tenderly, his gauntleted hand caressing her cheek. When he pulled back his expression changed to one of grim determination, “You’re right though; this changes our timeline a bit.” He got up and paced for a moment in thought before turning to face her again, “Do you really need me here tomorrow or are you going to be okay with just your sister?”

“Tam and I have it covered and if not I can text or call you; why?” Felicity asked him even though inside she was totally doing a fist pump.

He let out a breath, “I’m going to have to try to get to your dad before Luke does and discuss all this with him. Hopefully he’ll be okay but, in any case, the last thing I should do is blow off my entire day and compound things by aggravating him further.”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him. “Are you still coming here or are you going to the manor before you leave for work? You know, I could probably come with you today to help you talk to Dad. Tam can handle things here…of course, God only knows what she’d pick out but I’m really not looking forward to seeing all my ideas shot down followed by having her drag me from one bridal boutique to another afterwards. I would much rather be in the hot seat with you, trust me.”

“No, if I know Lucius then he’ll expect us to talk this out man to man. I know it sounds sexist as hell, but your father is old school that way. Plus, chances are, he’s going to want to say a few things that will probably upset you so it might be best if you aren’t there.” He rubbed his hand over his mouth, “I should probably go home after I patrol and let you get your rest,” he said at last. “Lucius always schedules an early breakfast meeting on Tuesdays so I want to try to beat him to the office.”

“You know, you don’t have to do this,” she told him, feeling another twinge of guilt. She got up and walked up to him, placing her arms around his waist as she laid her head on his chest. She felt his arms go around her and she made a contented noise before continuing, “Really. If you don’t want to tell Dad, I can call down to Starling and ask Luke not to say anything. For all we know he might not have even found out about it yet.”

“Between Barbara, your sister, Canary, and Tim it’s just a matter of time before someone says something,” he said in an aggrieved manner even as he laid a tender kiss on top of her hair. “No, might as well get it over with.”

“‘Might as well get it over with’,,” she said with a wry expression. “Wow, you do know how to lay the romance on thick, huh?”
He tilted her chin up and kissed her deeply until her knees nearly gave out, his hand moving from her waist to cup her bottom through her thin leggings and sweater. When he broke from the kiss he offered her a lusty smirk, “Is that romantic enough for you?”

“What; you kissing me until my knees wobble or grabbing my ass?”

“The kiss; grabbing your ass was purely for my benefit alone,” he told her.

She smirked, “I see, so the Bat is an ass man, huh?”

“Actually, I’m a fan of the whole package; your ass was just the first thing my hand happened to land on,” he told her with a grin.

“Look at you getting all sappy in your old age,” she teased huskily. He smacked her bottom playfully causing her to squeal in surprise and him to grin even wider. “What was that for?”

“Spur of the moment impulse but given your reaction I think we’ll have to revisit it again later,” he rumbled before capturing her lips again.

She laughed quietly against his lips, “Dirty old man.”

“Watch it or this dirty old man will be tempted to say to hell with patrolling tonight, take you over his knee, and teach you a lesson, young lady,” he promised in a low sexy timbre as he bent down to scrape his teeth on her neck causing her to shiver.

“Pervert. Get out of here before I’m tempted to hold you to that,” she said pushing him away playfully.

He pulled back but didn’t remove his hands from her waist. Instead he stared down at her for a moment before saying, “Move in with me.”

“What?” She said, her eyes widening in surprise.

“After I talk to Lucius I want you to move in with me,” he told her, the teasing gone from his tone to be replaced by something deeper. “I want you to move into the manor. Now, before we get married.”

“Bruce…” she breathed.

“I like this; I want to have this with you every day and I don’t want to have to wait,” he told her. “I want to go to bed with you and wake up together, I want to walk down to the cave with you beside me and put on my armor while you sit at your workstation and talk about your sister or whatever’s on your mind. I don’t want to have to leave our bed here then go back to the manor every night and I just… Look, we’re already living together or will be,” he told her seriously. “If you say you don’t want to live out there, fine; I’m still going to be sharing your bed every night until we’re married no matter what but with the renovations going on it’s going to be a mess and a half up there. Besides, the main Batcave has better equipment and more privacy. I agree that you absolutely should update this system but the Batcave under the manor should take precedence.”

“Bruce…” She began reluctantly.

“If you’re worried about keeping up appearances then I’ll happily stay with you at the penthouse but after I talk to your dad, it won’t really matter anymore,” he said, cutting off her argument. “We’re adults, he knows that, and he’ll rightly assume that if we’re serious enough to consider marriage that we’ve already had sex. Lucius might be old school but he’s not naïve. He knows that you’re probably not a virgin, not at your age, and given the hints he’s been dropping lately I suspect he
already knows how I feel about you.” He paused for a second, “I’m not trying to pressure you, I’ll play this any way you want, I just want you to consider moving in with me at the manor now because, like I said, the Batcave there is better equipped, that’s all; plus the renovation mess.”

“Because it makes sense, right?” She teased. “Purely from a logical standpoint, of course.”

“Of course,” he said, his lips twitching slightly before his expression turned serious. “Here or there; six of one, a half dozen of the other, it makes no difference to me.” He gave her a heated look, “And…I want you in my home, by my side, as my wife and partner. It’s where you belong and I don’t want to spend even one more day without you there.”

She stared at him for an extended moment. Put up or shut up, she told herself. Did she really want this? Putting everything else aside, Orbital, Isabel, everything else; did she want this?

She looked at Bruce as he stood there in his armor, his expression open and loving in a way that she knew was reserved only for her.

Still, she needed to hear him say it one more time. “Do you love me, Bruce? Do you really want to marry me?” She asked him. “Because you don’t have to; we can pretend the ‘M’ word never even crossed your mind. You won’t hurt my feelings or scare me away if you take it back; I’ll be here for you even if we keep what we have between us. If you don’t want this then I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

He nodded, “I want this; more than anything. I’m ready for this, Baby; are you?”

Was she?

Marrying Bruce would mean making him her home. That meant no more secrets. She loved him, she did, but if he found out what she was planning to do (and he would knowing him) he was going to be all kinds of pissed; probably pissed enough that he might never forgive her. That meant that if this was the last chance she had, she needed to make sure he knew exactly how she felt. Later on when he was full-on Bat and she was the one in his crosshairs, she needed to know that she said her piece.

She took a deep breath, “Did I ever tell you that Peggy Ann and her husband, Chao, had an arranged marriage?” He shook his head in the negative. “Well, sort of arranged; they met through a marriage broker but it all comes down to the same thing. Anyway, she would tell us stories about how she and Chao would go on group ‘dates’ with her family, how they never so much as held hands until they were married, but how happy they were together until he died in an accident just a few years later. Tam would ask her how it was that she knew she would be happy married to someone she’d never even kissed and she would say, ‘Love is easy, passion is easy; but marriage is serious business.’” She paused, “She told us that too many people enter into marriage riding a wave of lust and passion but those feelings are fleeting. She said that the problem with today’s society is that people have forgotten that marriage is supposed to be something binding and solemn, that you don’t play with it; if you make that commitment then you’d better be willing to honor it as best you can. The best marriages are the ones built on the understanding that there is no easy out and if you marry someone it’s because you want to create something larger than just the two of you, that you’re contributing to the community and creating a legacy that binds all of us together.”

She met his gaze with her own, “Marriage is serious business, Bruce. If all you want to do is stake a claim then fine; you can do that without putting a ring on my finger. I love you, I’ve always loved you, but marriage is on a whole other level. There are no takesies backies in marriage. I’m not always going to do what you want, I’m going to disappoint you and frustrate you and I guarantee that you’re going to piss me off royally from time to time. Marriage means working through that anger and still loving that person even when they screw up or things get scary. I need to know that
you won’t run or reject me; I need to know that I can screw up or disappoint you without worrying about losing you every time you get mad at me for something. I won’t lose myself to you, Bruce; I need you to respect the fact that I can think for myself and not try to steamroll me or dismiss what I have to say just because you think you’re protecting me or that you disagree with my decisions. If you can’t handle that then we need to drop this and save the declarations of intent for a time when you can.”

Okay, it was kind of cheating since he didn’t know he was about to be mad at her, but still…

“I’m not going to run.” He picked up her left hand and, repeating a gesture he’d made just a few days before, he kissed her ring finger. “Mine,” he told her. “This is my claim and, you’re right; it is serious business. I keep accusing you of being an old fashioned girl but, the truth is; I’m an old fashioned guy in a lot of ways. When I do something, it’s 100% or nothing. I know all of this seems fast, I know all the arguments your dad is going to make about how you’ve only been back for a few weeks and how we should get to know each other better first, but I already know everything I need to know. I’ve known you most of your life and I’ve been in love with you since you were eighteen years old. I love you and I want this. I’m ready.”

“I was nineteen, not eighteen,” she told him with a smile. “It still makes you a dirty old man, but…”

He popped her playfully on the butt again causing her to yelp more in surprise than pain, “Keep it up and you’ll be bent over my knee in no time. That or the workstation; I’m not picky.”

“Ow,” she grinned at him as she rubbed her cheek lightly. “Who are you supposed to be all of the sudden; Christian Grey?”

“Who?” He asked in amusement.

“Fifty Shades of Grey,” she told him. “It’s this pulp novel about bondage and spanking someone at work left in the ladies room at QC once and, let me tell you, the bathroom is exactly where it belonged. Talk about a piece of crap; I got three paragraphs in before I said ‘no’, and the last two paragraphs were a courtesy read.”

He smiled at her then ran his gloved hand over her hair lightly, “You were nineteen when we made love for the first time, but I was in love with you long before that. I should have realized it sooner but I was just too scared to acknowledge it at the time,” he told her solemnly. “I started falling in love with you the second I realized that you saw me for who I was under all the subterfuge and pretense. You’ve never seen me as Bruce or the Bat; you see the man who exists somewhere in between.” His lips turned upwards, his eyes dancing in amusement, “And yes, I’m speaking in the creepy third person again but I don’t know how else to say it. All I know is when I finally made my move it wasn’t a spur of the moment thing, not really; I’d been in love with you for months and that night I just so happened to reach my breaking point. Still, whether it happened then or a year later or yesterday or tomorrow, we were always going to be together. I wouldn’t have asked you in the first place if I had any doubts. Once I put my ring on this finger,” he kissed it again, “it’s never coming off. No matter what happens, you’re mine and I’m yours. You’re basherte to my basherter.”

“Yiddish, really?” She asked, utterly charmed by hearing the words leave his lips. “Do you even know what that means?”

“Bashert; one’s divinely foreordained spouse or soul mate, used to express the seeming fate or destiny of an auspicious or important event, friendship, or happening,” he recited. “I looked it up.” He looked down at her, the humor leaving his expression and replaced by something far more intense. “I know what I want, Baby; I know exactly how I feel and what this means to me. Now, the real question is, what do you want?”
She bit her bottom lip and considered that for a moment, “If I do this can we talk—really talk later?”
She asked him. “Not…not right away but soon? There are…things I need to tell you and I need to
know that you’ll listen to me, really listen without going all Bat on me.”

“I’ll do my best, that’s all I can promise. As for the rest…whenever you’re ready to talk, I’m here,”
he told her, reaching up to caress her cheek again. “Always.”

She took a deep breath, and leapt. “Okay, but my dad isn’t going to like it,” she warned him, her
nerves jangling but a huge weight lifting from her chest at the same time. “And Peggy is really not
going to like it. She already refers to you as ‘the bachelor’ like you have a disease or something. If I
move in before the wedding it’s going to be days and days’ worth of lectures beginning with the
words, ‘why should he buy the cow if he can get the milk for free?’ Of course Tam always came
back with ‘why sell the cow to buy the pig if you’re already getting the sausage’, so…”

His lips twitched upwards despite the dire note in her tone, relief casting over his expression as well,
“I’m fairly sure Lucius is going to be pissed at me no matter what, so we may as well go for broke.”
He rubbed his thumb against the dimple in her cheek, “As for Peggy Ann, I’ll get Alfred to sweet
talk her into it. If that fails, well, she can only refer to me as ‘the bachelor’ until I marry you and I’ll
be sure to make it very clear to her that I don’t believe in long engagements. So does that mean
you’re definitely saying yes? And by ‘yes’ I mean all of it; moving in, dinner by seven, the whole
nine yards.”

She blew out a puff of air and scowled. “Fine, moving in and dinner by seven it is, but you’re
helping me move my stuff, you know that right?” She told him. “And now I should tell you that I
already promised Tam and Sara they could stay here in the penthouse. I was planning on teaching
Tam to run the alternate Watchtower site and introducing you to Sara to see how you got along
before asking her if she wanted to join the team on a contingency basis since she’s been thinking of
making a move to Gotham anyway.”

He looked down at her, a hint of the Bat stealing over his features, “You invited the Canary onto my
team without consulting me first?”

“The way I see it the team is now half mine so she’d be joining my half, not yours,” she told him.

Despite his obvious aggravation with her his lips tugged upwards, “This isn’t a community property
state.”

“No, it’s an equitable property state which means that all marital properties are divided under a
concept of ‘fairness and equitability’. Something you should already know since, technically, you did
pass the bar but, just in case, what that means is that since I will be handling the coms I should have a
fair and equal voice in who joins the team.”

He looked down at her with a raised eyebrow, “Should I be worried about the fact that we aren’t
even married yet and you’ve already read up on divorce laws in this state?”

“Probably,” she told him. “Oh, and I should warn you that she also asked for my permission to sleep
with you and I told her she could try but I doubted you’d go for it.”

“I see,” he said, a hint of amusement filtering through his tone. “I thought you said she wanted to
sleep with you.”

“Sara is into fairness and equability as well,” she said in a deadpan.

“Two beautiful blondes at the same time; tempting,” he said with a smirk.
“Thought you said you weren’t into having an audience and sharing,” she reminded him.

“Well, a man can change his mind, can’t he?”

“No,” she told him flatly. “No, he can’t.”

“Damn, there goes that fantasy blown all to hell,” he tossed back. He straightened his spine then told her in a more serious voice. “Fine, I’ll meet with her but if I decide I can’t trust her then she doesn’t come anywhere near the Batcave; either of them, understood?”

“Agreed,” she told him, giving him one last quick peck on the lips before grabbing his cowl off her workstation and handing it to him. “Now go to work, Batman; it’s hero time.”

“Uh uh,” he said shaking his head then bent her over his arm in a Hollywood style kiss and proceeded to snog the hell out of her. When he broke free he looked down at her dizzy expression in smug amusement, “That’s how we start our day from now on, Mrs. Wayne, understood?” He gave her one last smirk before putting her back on her feet, tugging on his cowl, then headed for the tumbler. “Keep all the channels open but I’m going to start at the docks tonight so pay special attention to any chatter coming from the warehouse district.”

She touched her fingers to her lips and smiled, “I’m not new, you know,” she tossed back before sitting down and putting on the Bluetooth headset. “Love you; be safe and come home!”

“Always,” he told her before slipping behind the wheel and heading out into the night.
Chapter Thirty-Seven

Just before nine am, the cab dropped Felicity off at the gate to the Old Axis Chemical Processing Plant. She meant to be there earlier but, unfortunately, things hadn’t gone to plan the night before—at
At first they’d been on a roll; just a few drug dealers, a mugging or two, a couple of random convenience store robberies, and some morons who were off high off their asses trying to break into a pawn shop by tossing a brick through the window because they wanted to prove who could play the long guitar solo to ‘Stairway to Heaven’ better. (That one had her making ‘this is your brain on drugs’ jokes for twenty minutes straight until Bruce put the kibosh on it.) It wasn’t until four am, right in the middle of Bruce telling her to call it a night that everything went tits up.

A total whack-a-doo by the name of Julian Day speciously decided that she, and the rest of Gotham for that matter, didn’t need to sleep after all and instead thought that four am was the perfect time for a parade of Mardi Gras Madness and Mayhem...with Monkeys.

Monkeys.

One more time: M-O-N-K-E-Y-S.

Only.

In.

Gotham.

Apparently Mr. Day’s major damage was that he liked to play dress up and commit holiday related crimes. As such, Mr. Day aka ‘The Calendar Man’, who looked like a flamboyant cross between Truman Capote and an over-plucked and manscaped drag queen, decided to mark the celestial fusion of Chinese New Year and Mardi Gras by giving them their own theme crime.

And how does one combine those two holidays into a theme crime you might ask? Felicity sighed wearily: With monkeys.

Apparently this was the year of the monkey, therefore Mr. Day decided to unleash a horde of trained monkeys dressed in green, purple, and glittery gold tuxedos complete with tiny top hats on the Diamond District and then rode through town in a Fu Manchu and brightly colored zhiju robes tossing them from a parade float like Mardi Gras beads.

The fact that a monkey was behind the wheel just added to the crazy.

Well, ape. Chimpanzees were technically apes, but they were close enough to ‘monkeys’ to suit Day and ‘Mad Mardi Gras Monkeys’ seemed to roll off the tongue a bit better than ‘Mad Mardi Gras Apes’ did.

Another thing she learned last night, besides the ‘apes’ thing and Julian Day’s willingness to forego accuracy for alliteration, was that chimpanzees, no matter how well trained or intelligent they may be, weren’t the best drivers. Of course, it could also be because their little top hats kept falling into their eyes.

Only in Gotham, she thought once more while shaking her head. Tim was going to hate that he missed this one. Or not...she thought with a grimace. Plus she was pretty sure it was just a matter of time before someone posted it to YouTube anyway; he could catch it on the replay.

She winced, poor Bruce; he was not having a good day at all and it was about to be immortalized in internet history. This one would be playing on late night talk shows and Animal Planet for weeks, possibly years.
While Bruce was tossing nets over chimpanzees who were getting on their ‘Laissez les bons temps rouler,’ and trying to slow Calendar Man’s crazy roll, she was stuck humping and hacking, monitoring CCTV feeds, directing traffic by patching into the traffic lights, and desperately trying not to add to Bruce’s night by expressing her disgust as the monkey’s fought back by using their own naturally excreted ‘arsenal’ in self-defense.

Yeah, chimps might be cute but they were really gross and apparently as casual about personal hygiene as they were about traffic laws. If there was ever a night to be an out of town member of the Bat Family, that was the one.

It was chaos. The chimps were driving the on the wrong side of the road, running over newsstands and mail boxes and, even before dawn, Gotham still had plenty of traffic so cars were being run off the road and crashing into each other as they desperately tried to avoid the colorfully decorated flatbed truck hurtling toward them. Everything from Louis Armstrong singing ‘When the Saints Go Marching In’ to Benny Grunch’s ‘Ain’t No Place to Pee on Mardi Gras Day’ was blasted at window shaking levels from the sound system connected to the Rex Krewe float and Day, dressed as the King of the Carnival with a decidedly Asian twist, added to the noise and chaos by greeting early morning commuters and people coming off the graveyard shift with a hearty rendition of ‘If I Ever Cease To Love’ as he tossed diamonds onto the crowded roadways.

People were jumping in front of cars or outside of them to scoop up the diamonds, fist fights were breaking out, monkey poop was flying through the air like really smelly Mardi Gras confetti—by the time everything was sorted Julian Day was in Arkham on a psych hold, the chimps were rounded up and taken safely to an animal rescue, and, luckily, there were a lot of minor injuries and some property damage, but no fatalities. The ironic thing was that the diamonds were all of inferior quality. Day, having had more interest in creating chaos than profit, had chosen to rob the easiest mark he could which was an industrial diamond supplier. While they were still diamonds, they were the type they ground into dust to make cutting tools and high end knife sharpeners rather than the finer quality of stones used to make jewelry.

Needless to say, she didn’t get her nap and Bruce was most definitely not feeling the party atmosphere when all was said and done. He really didn’t appreciate it when she signed off by expressing her condolences on the fact that he’d had such a shitty night.

Honestly, she didn’t even mean it that way; it was a completely accidental pun. Besides, technically it was a shitty night. A very, very shitty night.

Poor Alfred, she thought. He might just want to burn that set of armor. She was pretty sure that you couldn’t just toss something like that in the washer and she seriously doubted Bruce would be up to getting hosed down in the garden as the older gentleman tried to power wash the monkey poop away. As much as she loved Bruce she was immensely grateful for the fact that he wasn’t coming back to the penthouse that day for many reasons, not least of which was the fact that she just could not handle that; not after the Poo Pirate tried to make her his queen a while back.

She shuddered. Poor Bruce. Poor, poor Bruce. She felt so bad for him, just not bad enough to tell him to come back to the penthouse. Bombs, guns, psychopaths; those she could handle, but ever since the Sewer King she’d had a very negative reaction towards all things poop related.

She stifled a yawn. Perhaps someday soon she could laugh about it but right now she was just a tired and over-caffeinated bundle of nerves who was running on fumes. By the time everything was wrapped up, it was nearly seven and, after tossing the ingredients for soup in the crockpot and two pots of coffee later, here she was.

Despite the fact that she wasn’t expected until the next day, someone in the control room had
apparently been given authorization to allow her entrance because, this time when she approached the gates, they opened without her having to say a word and she waited by the guard shack for the security team to retrieve her.

When the guards arrived they were accompanied by a strikingly beautiful Asian woman who was dressed warmly in a fitted black leather jacket and nicely tailored dark wool slacks. Despite the high wind that morning that was quickly making a rat’s nest of Felicity’s own golden curls (why she hadn’t worn it up in her customary pony tail that day she hadn’t a clue), the Japanese woman’s own choppy asymmetrical blunt cut remained neat and not nearly as badly windblown as her own.

Groaning inwardly, Felicity rubbed her hands down the front of her trench coat and mentally reassessed her own suit that was hidden under the thick layer of wool as she compared it with the other woman’s sharply professional but far more practical outfit. Knowing Isabel’s fondness for Zac Posen, during the Great Battle of the Storage Units, she’d managed to grab several business appropriate pieces by the designer while still staying within her own comfort zone. The classically tailored suit consisted of a sheath dress that ended at the knee and a matching tailored jacket that ended just below the waist. With its sweetheart neckline, low enough to show some cleavage but still fairly conservatively styled, she knew she looked office appropriate despite the body conscious fit. The problem was, this wasn’t a normal office setting. As she thought back to the first time she’d been to the OO control room she recalled that, although most of the techs had been dressed in everything from office casual (khakis, polos, blouses, etc.) to ripped jeans and graphic tees, only Miranda and Isabel had been in suits.

She gave herself a split second to worry then dismissed it. She’d relax her wardrobe as she learned the lay of the land but, for now, she needed to make an impression on Isabel first and foremost. Co-opting Isabel’s designer of choice was a part of that strategy.

She didn’t trust Isabel and she certainly didn’t like her, not even her big reveal of a tragic childhood had changed that, but she understood the politics of women and fashion. Men wore their aggression in their attitudes and body language; women did so by much subtler methods. She wasn’t planning on running into Isabel but she wasn’t not expecting it either. Since she was supposed to meet her tomorrow it wouldn’t surprise her if the woman was a day early; after all, that was her strategy as well. Dressing in Isabel’s designer of choice while still paying homage to her own preference for conservatively styled, yet unmistakably bright and feminine clothing, sent a message. It said, ‘I am just as capable at playing this game as you are but I’ll do it on my own terms.’

Like Mama T always said, “Women don’t dress for men; they dress for other women.”

While Isabel preferred severe tailoring and overt sexuality, Felicity was more into color and feminine quirkiness. What made her decide on this particular suit was the fact that it was bright flame orange brocade with clever piping that emphasized the lines of her body without being overt. She paired some orange suede Manolo’s in a low kitten heel to go with it because, again, icy sidewalks and broken ankles had a tendency to hurt. This was her announcing to Isabel that she would not be intimidated. She was in her comfort zone, she reminded herself. She couldn’t afford to psych herself out over something as silly as her outfit.

“Ms. Smoak?” The woman said, extending her hand in a firm shake as Felicity climbed on board the golf cart. “My name is Tatsu Yamashiro; I’m one of the team leaders and acting Director of this branch of the OO. At least until you take over,” she added with a slight smile. “We weren’t really expecting you until tomorrow but I must say I’m rather glad you’re here. It may have taken me quite some time to meet you otherwise.”

“Why’s that? And please, call me Felicity.” She said, taking a moment to subtly examine her
companion as they entered the facility. She was incredibly delicate looking at first glance, fine boned and petite. She couldn’t be more than 5’2”, a full three inches shorter than her own 5’5”, and probably less than a hundred pounds. Despite that, Felicity had been around enough trained operators to recognize the bearing and alert state of a warrior when she saw one. Even though the woman was speaking directly to her, she seemed totally aware of her surroundings and completely alert.

And then there was the samurai sword she wore strapped to her back. That was kind of a giveaway right there.

“We just got an alert about a mission in Siberia. We were just about to call in a team to handle it so that we can scramble tonight and be there by tomorrow,” she told her.

“What’s the mission?” Felicity asked as the cart came to a stop and they both got into the elevator.

“I don’t know yet. Truthfully, I’m as in the dark as you are; Isabel was calling a meeting right before you arrived to discuss the particulars,” Tatsu told her as she walked up to the scanner and spoke, “Authorization: Katana and guest.”

The biometrics scanner read her iris and then the laser net flashed inside of the elevator shaft covering them both in a bright red light.

//Confirmed//

“Isabel will go ahead and set you up with your own access codes today.”

She wasn’t all that surprised Isabel was already there. In fact, she was kind of glad since that meant she was already getting a handle on the woman.

“Can I ask you something?” Felicity said, eyeing the other woman as the elevator headed down.

“Certainly, what is it you’d like to know?” She asked with a curious lilt. Her accent was as delicate as her appearance; a softly lilting British inflection but with the mellifluous influence of her native Japan. There was both strength and steel in the woman’s eyes and something inside them spoke to her. This was a woman who had suffered great loss and had survived.

A slight buzzing began in her ears and Felicity tried to shake it off as she spoke, chalking it up to too much caffeine, “Why are you the acting Director? Why not just give you the job since you’re obviously qualified? They wouldn’t have trusted you with the interim position if you weren’t.”

Her mouth curved into a wry smile as she raised an eyebrow in her direction, “First and foremost, I suppose it’s because I don’t want it,” she told her. “No offense, but I’m a field operator; herding cats isn’t something I do gladly.”

“No offense taken. It just tells me that you’re a very smart lady,” she returned good-naturedly. The buzzing in her ears got louder and she could almost make out a man’s voice followed by an amused chuckle. “Are you by any chance wearing coms or a radio of some sort?” She asked, rubbing her ear. The sound was really starting to bother her. It was like it was at the edge of her hearing and it made her teeth buzz uncomfortably. A pressure began to build at the back of her skull and she felt like a headache was threatening as the voice became clearer.

“No,” she frowned at her, her eyes looking on in concern. “Are you feeling alright, Ms. Smoak?”

“I’m fine; it’s probably nothing,” she said, her brow furrowing slightly as the man’s voice grew louder. He was speaking in…Japanese?
“Too much caffeine,” she told her with a smile even though it now felt like the bones in her skull were positively vibrating and there was a sharp metallic taste on her tongue. “It was a…long night. And it’s Felicity, remember?” She said, forcing a smile.

It’s probably one of those weird things where your fillings pick up radio broadcasts or something, she thought to herself. That or she was more nervous than she thought and she was having some kind of weird auditory hallucination as a result.

Or a brain tumor; could be a brain tumor, she thought idly. Despite Bruce’s reassurances, she was pretty sure her rampant cellphone usage would one day be the death of her.

Bruce. How guilty did she feel right about now? A lot, that’s how much.

Don’t go there, she told herself. That way lay dragons and if she was ever going to have any kind of peace this needed to be settled once and for all. If Bruce found out and rejected her for it then...

She tamped down on her emotions. She didn’t have time for that now. If he rejected her afterwards then that just meant their relationship wasn’t meant to be. The idea of that was, in a word, depressing, but she needed to do this.

Heroes fight, she reminded herself, heroes die so that others can live. They lose sometimes and they bleed both inside and out for what’s right. Her first priority was to protect her team; to protect Bruce, Oliver, Dig, and all the rest. Even though they couldn’t see it, this was her fight, not theirs, and it had to be done on her terms. If saving their lives meant losing his love, then that was the price she would just have to pay.

She’d lived without his love for four years; she could live without it again.

She didn’t want to, but she could as long as he and the rest of them were safe.

Again she rubbed her ear as the irritating buzzing continued and tried to ignore it.

“And you may call me Tatsu. Are you sure you’re alright though? Your color looks a bit off.” The woman gave her another look of concern but then the doors opened and Isabel was standing here, her cold dark eyes gleaming with something approaching animation and dressed in her signature Zac Posen. It was a deep burgundy jersey silk wrap dress with a plunging neckline and long sleeves that she paired with some Louboutin suicide heels in complimentary shade of charcoal.

“Felicity; what a pleasant surprise,” she said with a knowing smirk.

“Obviously not that much of a surprise since I got through the door,” she replied easily.

She didn’t comment on that, instead her smile grew a bit more shark like and she gestured for them to follow. “Some new intel came down the line and we’re going to have to scramble a team in a few hours so it’s a good thing you’re here.”

“Ms. Yamashiro; I’m sorry, Tatsu, mentioned that there was a situation developing,” she said inquisitively as she turned a small polite smile toward the Asian woman beside her before returning her attention towards Isabel. “Need some help?”

“As a matter of fact we do, yes. I’m planning on briefing the team remotely in a few minutes. Until then, I’d appreciate it if we could talk in private?”
“Of course,” Felicity said, feeling a slight bit of apprehension. Her vibe was pinging off the charts now for sure.

“Ms. Yamashiro, would you mind calling in your team and letting them know we’ll be having a video-conference in ten minutes?” Isabel said to the other woman, not waiting for a response as she turned on her heel imperiously and matched into the Director’s office.

Felicity followed, rubbing her ear as the buzzing hit her eardrum again.

As soon as they entered what she had been told was to be ‘her’ office a few days ago, Isabel took the power position behind the large desk leaving Felicity in the hot-seat. Knowing what she was doing, Felicity allowed it to roll off her back and removed her coat and bag, hanging them on the coatrack near the door, then sat primly in the large leather armchair across from her by crossing her legs at the ankles and folding her hands in her lap, adopting a casual and unassuming air.

If there was one good thing about exhaustion, it was that it tended to steady the nerves.

Isabel’s dark eyes swept over her figure from top to bottom and a hint of grudging respect entered her expression. For an extended moment they observed one another, Felicity resisting the urge to give into her obvious power play, instead allowing Isabel to waste her time as she parked her ass in the comfy chair and tried her best not to let loose with a spine-cracking yawn.

Finally, Isabel reached for the tablet in front of her and queued up some surveillance footage that appeared on the large monitor behind her. She watched as a lens zoomed in to film her conversation with Sara at the airport. There was no sound, merely their images as they stood close to one another, their features in profile and obviously engaged in an intense conversation. Finally Sara’s fingers found her chin, tipping it upwards and taking her mouth in a tender kiss. They then embraced warmly before parting, each walking in opposite directions; Sara to the Wayne Gulfstream and Felicity to a safer distance as she watched the jet take off once her friend was safely ensconced inside.

“Well?” Isabel prompted.

“Well what?” Felicity asked her, nonplussed.

“You have nothing at all to say about that?”

“Um, you guys put a tail on me?” She shrugged. “I’m not really all that surprised. You’re a vigilante organization and you’ve already made it clear that you’ve been watching me for some time so what do you want me to say?”

“You said you didn’t know the Canary,” Isabel told her. “You obviously do.”

“What? You expected me to lay it all on the line at our first meeting?” Felicity asked sarcastically. “For all I knew, you were bluffing or part of some kind of evil plot. Truth be told I’m still not completely sold on the idea that you aren’t.”

“And after our second meeting?” She asked archly, completely ignoring the fact that Felicity just plainly stated she still didn’t trust her. “You still failed to disclose your relationship with the Canary then as well.”
“You already knew we worked together,” she conceded. “Why bother telling you something you already knew?” She took a centering breath and leaned forward slightly, “Isabel, what exactly are you driving at with all this?”

“I’m just a bit surprised that you would so adamantly deny the fact that you are obviously in a sexual relationship with Sara Lance when a picture is worth a thousand words.”

Without thinking about it, Felicity snorted, “When did that happen?”

“During our first meeting,” she answered, misunderstanding her outburst.

Oh, she thought. She thinks Sara is my…

Mentally going over the conversation she’d had with Sara at the airport she could see why. The distance and ambient noise of the airstrip would have made picking up on their conversation difficult but, even if all they got were snippets of what was being said, Sara’s speech about ‘hiding in plain sight’ could be misconstrued as Felicity being in the closet. The chaste goodbye kiss they shared could also be seen as evidence supporting that.

Okay, this could work. “And like I mentioned a moment ago, I had no reason to trust you then, did I?”

“So you don’t deny it?” Isabel gave her a steady look, a dangerous glitter of something dark and deadly within her gaze.

Time slowed in Felicity’s brain as she quickly constructed a plan to use Isabel’s mistake to her advantage. Oliver’s suppositions about Isabel’s assumptions about her sexuality were correct; now she just needed to use her ignorance to her advantage by playing into it and throwing her off the mark.

“Is there a policy against fraternization within this organization?” She countered.

“No,” she said smoothly but the hint of menace was still there. “I’m merely concerned about the fact that you’ve managed to hide your preferences so completely. It implies that you are ashamed of your sexuality which, in turn, provides an obvious security risk and leaves you susceptible to blackmail.”

“Do I look like the kind of person who would be ashamed of something like that?” Felicity asked her calmly.

“Possibly,” the other woman said.

“I’m not,” she said dryly.

“Not what?”

“Not ashamed,” came her succinct reply. “I just choose not to advertise who I sleep with and certainly not in the workplace. There’s a difference between being ashamed and being discrete.”

“I just find it odd that in this day and age you would feel the need to go to such lengths,” Isabel said with a smirk. “What you claim is discretion looks more like shame from where I’m sitting. Amanda Waller would not hesitate to use your puritanical need for ‘discretion’ against you in order to infiltrate our organization.”

“She could try,” Felicity snorted. “It doesn’t mean she’d succeed.”
“Why the secrecy then?” Isabel asked again, turning her shark-like gaze on her once more, “Not to harp on it, but my job is to decide whether or not your discretion is based on confidence or fear, strength or vulnerability.”

Felicity sighed and leaned back in her chair with a bored air, “I’m the youngest child of Lucius Fox and I imagine you’ve pulled up files and files of information on my family by now but you probably haven’t managed to find much of anything on me. There’s a reason for that,” she told her. “My mother’s name was regularly abused by gossipmongers and my brother and sister spent years being hounded by the paparazzi until they became old news because, other than a few normal teenage antics, they weren’t nearly as gossip worthy as most of the other attention-seeking celebutantes in their crosshairs. I never envied that kind of attention and I actively avoided it because I wanted a career outside of Wayne Enterprises. Employers, as you may know, dislike hiring people with PR baggage. If the press was made aware of whom I share my bed with, it would undoubtedly make the papers.” Ain’t that the truth, she thought ruefully.

“While I’m not particularly worried about professional backlash, I don’t like my partners to have to worry about being hounded by the press. My sister has always been open about her bisexuality and, as a result, she wound up losing one of her first serious girlfriends when members of the so-called ‘press corps’ knocked on her parent’s door and asked them if they knew their daughter was gay and were they aware that she was sleeping with the CEO of Wayne Enterprise’s daughter.”

“Sara Lance is far from discreet about her liaisons with members of the same sex,” Isabel pointed out.

“But she is a mask and she’s Oliver Queen’s ex,” she told her. “If the gossip rags reported that Oliver was cuckolded by his EA who happened to be the daughter of Lucius Fox and the woman he left his wife for over twenty years ago it would be a bit hard to do either of my jobs effectively.”

“You know, I suspected for a long time that you were sleeping with Oliver--”

“Obviously I wasn’t,” Felicity said dryly.

The other woman nodded in acknowledgement, “Back then I assumed when you allowed the Canary to spend the night at your home it was either an act of cleverness on your part to try to get close to the woman you saw as your rival or just you being pathetic. Now I am confronted by this information and, I must admit, I’m rather intrigued as to how I could have missed this before even if you were as adamant about maintaining your privacy as you claim.”

That made Felicity pause, “You were staking out my house when Sara was there? Sara hasn’t been in Starling for a couple of months; I thought you said you didn’t know I was attached to Oliver’s mission until recently. If that’s true then why did you send a surveillance team to my home?”

“We were investigating the Canary, not you,” Isabel said smoothly without missing a beat. “When she would stay at your home we made a note of it. Even so, we saw nothing to suggest that the two of you were involved in a sexual relationship.”

“You weren’t looking for it, for one,” Felicity told her, filing away the rather large ping that Isabel had left on her radar with interest. “You saw what you wanted to see; you aren’t the first person to make gross assumptions based on appearance and circumstances.”

“Like Oliver did when he made sexual advances toward you in the conference room,” she said then watched as Felicity’s expression didn’t waver. Her lips quirked upwards at the corners, “So tell me, did he know about you and his supposed girlfriend?”
“As far as Oliver knows, Sara and I are merely friends,” she told her. It was the truth, she thought with an inward eye roll.

“And how is it that you managed to keep it so quiet even from him?”

“Isabel, let’s cut through the passive aggressive crap and get to the crux of the matter,” she told her baldly. “You wouldn’t have hit on me if you didn’t think that there was a chance I might reciprocate. The reason I didn’t is because, frankly, I don’t mix business with pleasure and I certainly don’t leap into bed with people I don’t trust. You may have thought that there was something between Oliver and myself, and it’s true that I consider him a friend, but he never came to my home and we never socialized outside of the mission and QC for a reason.”

“And yet you obviously mixed business and pleasure with Sara Lance,” she told her. “You were, by your own admission, having an affair.”

“Sara was the exception to the rule,” she said smoothly. “Also, it wasn’t much of an ‘affair’, truth be told.” Now was when she started to weave some serious bullshit, “Like Oliver, Sara has a tendency to get caught up in the whole vicious cycle between him and her sister, Laurel. I don’t do that sort of thing and she knows it; I find it messy and destructive. After she and Oliver split the first time, we became close and it was made clear that she and Oliver were done romantically. She left Starling, we maintained contact and when she came back into town she would stay with me.” Still the truth even though she was being more than a bit ambiguous. “When she and Oliver restarted their sexual relationship, I was left out in the cold and completely forgotten. I didn’t react well to that.”

That was, unfortunately, also the truth. Not that it was Sara’s fault; Oliver always tended to have tunnel vision whenever he became involved with someone romantically and she was usually the one who had to wait in the sidelines until it passed and do damage control in the meantime.

Except when it came to his feelings about her, apparently. With her he was suddenly shutting not just the door to their relationship but putting a deadbolt on the thing.

Using a hint of the bitterness she was feeling to come out in her tone, she continued. “Like I said, I don’t play that way. We made no commitments but I was hurt by it and it changed the way I thought about them both for a while even though I maintained a certain level of professionalism and didn’t allow my feelings to get in the way of the mission.” More truth; if Isabel was running a voice analysis she’d still be coming up clean.

“You seemed fairly chummy in that surveillance footage,” Isabel drawled.

Felicity smirked at her and leaned back in her chair, “That footage is of one friend saying goodbye to another. Just because we aren’t romantically involved that doesn’t mean I don’t still consider her to be a friend. Plus, she kissed me, not the other way around. The truth is that Sara has made it very clear that she wants to have a deeper relationship with me but I’m the one who told her that friendship is as far as I’m willing to go. I asked her to come see me after I spoke to you and Miranda, not just to get her opinion on your organization, but to make sure we could still work together effectively.” Ding, ding, ding! And there’s the trifecta of obfuscation!

No need to lie when you can muddy the truth like a champ, right?

“And can you?” Isabel asked, still stony in her countenance although Felicity could tell she scored a hit or two.

“Absolutely,” she told her.
“You couldn’t with Oliver,” she said with an almost serpentine note of satisfaction.

“I was never involved with Oliver romantically before he misconstrued my intentions in the conference room,” she told her, allowing some of the pain and anger she’d felt at that time to filter through. “I also don’t appreciate being manhandled.”

Most of the time, she said as an internal aside. She didn’t like being grabbed and treated like a piece of meat but she kind of liked a little bit of forceful lovemaking occasionally.

…a lot, actually.

Memories of Bruce tossing her on the bed then ravishing her flooded her brain and she began to feel a bit flushed.

She cleared her throat and unbuttoned her jacket, taking it off and laying it across her lap before turning a sardonic eye onto the other woman. Time to go on the offensive. “What’s this really about, Isabel? Please tell me it’s not because I turned you down? If it is then I would be highly disappointed.”

A flash of anger sparked in the other woman’s eyes but her calm expression never wavered, “Why would I be the least bit concerned about that?”

“That’s good to hear,” Felicity said, taking the power position. She didn’t spend years sitting in the corner of Lucius’s office without picking up a few things. “I’m glad to know that this little encounter is about security concerns and not hurt feelings.”

“Feelings?” Isabel nearly spat out. “‘Feelings’ don’t enter into this, I assure you.”

“That’s good,” Felicity told her, allowing a small smile to play around her lips. Now she was going to put her acting skills to the test. Centering herself she said, “Because, as I mentioned before, I don’t mix business with pleasure but…”

“But?” Isabel asked, one well-groomed eyebrow shooting up in a mixture of feigned contempt.

“I have been known to make exceptions,” Felicity told her, clamping down on the part of her that was shaking like a leaf and channeling her sister’s courage.

Suddenly Isabel’s eyes began to glow with that strange inner light once more as the woman paused to take a second look, “You also said you don’t sleep with anyone you don’t trust and you obviously don’t trust me.”

“Guess that makes me a bit of a challenge then, doesn’t it?” She told her putting just a hint of flirtation in her tone.

Isabel’s expression changed slightly; not a huge change but, for the normally ice cold woman before her, it was a significant one. Her facial muscles relaxed slightly and her eyes began to dance darkly as they roved her figure once more, “And, were I so inclined, how do you suppose I would meet that particular challenge?”

“By proving me wrong,” Felicity told her. “Make me believe that I can trust you and we’ll see where it goes.”

“And how do I do that exactly?” Isabel asked, now showing obvious interest as she rose from her chair to move around the desk, leaning against it in such a way to set off her own athletic build and feminine curves.
“By not playing games for one,” Felicity told her. “I’m very discriminating in my partners, both professionally and personally. Next time you have a question, just ask and I’ll tell you what you want to know but that’s a two-way street. Do that and we can build on it.”

“What do you want to know?” Isabel asked her.

“Nothing at the moment,” Felicity answered, “but when I do have questions I’ll expect the truth.”

“And how does that translate to a personal relationship?” She asked her, her lips taking on a seductive bent.

“If I give you all the answers then where’s the challenge in that?” She asked her, “But here’s a hint: I’m the kind of person who appreciates a slow burn.”

No, not really, she thought to herself. She hated a slow burn, fuck a slow burn; she spent years in a slow burn with Oliver and look at how that ended, but she definitely didn’t want anything burning around Isabel. Even if she were so inclined to date women, Isabel had what her brother once referred to as ‘the crazy eyes’.

Yeah, sleeping with that woman would be like begging someone to put a big old pot of bunny soup on the stove.

“And what if I wasn’t looking for a ‘relationship’?” Isabel asked with a smirk.

“Then you should scratch your itches elsewhere,” she told her flat out. “If you intend to try to convince me to go beyond a professional relationship with you then, fair warning, I don’t do casual.”

“An old fashioned girl, hmm?” Isabel said with another one of her strangely disconcerting expressions.

Something about the way she said that made a shiver go up Felicity’s spine. Bruce said the same thing but her expression and tone were so much like Slade’s that for a moment there she could almost feel the hot rain and wind as it whipped around her, along with the curve of the explosive charge and detonator as they weighed down her pockets.

“Old fashioned, perhaps; but that doesn’t mean I’m not worth the extra effort,” she promised, fighting down the panic that threatened to swell within her chest whenever she thought about that day. Now was definitely not the time to go tiptoeing through her own emotional time bombs.

“However, as I said, if you’re looking for someone who’s okay with sharing and likes an audience, I suggest we just forget this conversation and keep it professional from here on out. Not that I’m judging, but I’m just not a naked twister kind of girl.”

“We’ll see,” Isabel said, her normally icy stare heating up slightly before again assuming a mask of professionalism. “Shall we go join the others for the briefing?”

Felicity nodded and got up from the chair. She started to put her jacket back on but Isabel stopped her.

“No, leave it off,” she told her, her dark eyes admiring the tailored fit of the dress, “You look perfect just the way you are.”

Felicity shrugged on the jacket and buttoned it a little defiantly, “Challenge, remember?” She told her with a hint of dry wit.

“Hmm. By the way, I do like that suit,” the other woman said, engaging in her own battle of (not so)
subtle seduction. “You’ll have to invite me into your bedroom soon; I’d love the chance to root around in your closet a bit and see what else you have hidden away.”

“Who knows? Maybe; but I don’t let just anyone into my ‘closet’.” And you are never getting inside of my drawers, lady. Never ever! Keep your crazy bunny soup vibe way the hell over there, you scary ice bitch.

Something told her that Bruce wasn’t the only one destined to have a bad day at work.

The next morning China White and Vargas were behind bars, approximately one hundred and thirty-six million dollars’ worth of coke was seized, and no one was seriously hurt.

It was a good day for Team Arrow.

Thea had come downstairs sometime during the night and introduced herself to Barbara while they had been gone and now the whole team was sitting around and laughing over coffee and breakfast take out as they enjoyed their victory. The only thing that would have made it perfect would be if...

...if Felicity was still there.

Oliver rubbed his neck wearily, his good humor fading quickly. Wayne asked her to marry him. What the fuck, he thought irately even though the logical part of his brain reminded him that he had no right to feel anything. Still, just days ago she called to tell him that all he needed to do was ask and she’d choose him instead, and now she was going to marry someone else; she was going to be that son of a bitch’s wife?

It just...it wasn’t right. He let her go, he told her to move on, but that didn’t stop him from feeling like she was still supposed to be his, but now she was Wayne’s.

It was his arms that would hold her, his name she’d take, and it was his children she’d carry within her womb…

Oliver’s smile dropped off his face and he clenched his jaw as he tried to take his mind off of what Tim had let slip earlier.

“Hey Ollie, you okay?” Sara asked softly as she came up from behind him to bump his arm playfully.

“I’m good,” he said, turning to her. “Listen, since we have a minute--?”

“I didn’t know about Isabel Rochev and I never shared your secrets with anyone,” she said cutting him off. She didn’t sound mad or insulted, she merely stated it matter-of-factly.

He nodded, “That’s good enough for me but I had to ask.” And just like that he was satisfied. He’d known Sara too long, been through too much with her by his side, not to know when she was or wasn’t telling the truth.

They might not work as a couple for more than a few weeks at a time, but they shared a soul. He’d know if she were lying to him. They might be able to lie to everyone else but not to each other…and Felicity.

Another thing they had in common; both of them learned to rely on her as their confessor and conscience long ago. From the minute she met Felicity she saw the light that surrounded her and
responded to it just as he had. He also hadn’t missed the glint of interest in her eye when she looked at his IT girl either. A large part of him had always been a bit jealous of the bond the two women had formed outside of him, especially since Sara had always flirted so openly with Felicity in his presence knowing he could never allow himself to go there…even though the other girl was probably too innocent to realize that Sara was only half kidding when she did so.

He fucked up, he thought. He should have just made his move right from the start or not done it at all; one or the other. Had he acted on his attraction toward her from day one he might have lost her but he wouldn’t be feeling this way now. She would have become just a slight burn in his heart like McKenna, and not the raw nerve she was to him now. Sara had once confessed to being tempted a time or two with Felicity, especially when the little blonde got, quote; ‘super cute when she’s in her warm and fuzzies and all liquored up’, but she played it safe like he should have done. Sara always was smarter than him. She might not have ever gotten the girl they were both more than a little in love with, but at least she still had a friendship with her; it was a hell of a lot more than what he had right now for damn sure.

And now she was with her brother; yet another ‘what the hell’ moment for him last night. He hitched his chin towards Luke who was sitting with Tim and Barbara as they entertained the rest of the team with a few stories of their own adventures. “When did that happen, by the way?”

“It’s recent,” she told him. “Really recent; but I like him.” She smiled at him, “I like Felicity’s entire family actually. I’m this close to getting her sister as well.” She said holding her thumb and forefinger in a pinching gesture.

“Really?” Oliver said with a rueful shake of his head.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “Ollie, she’s hot,” she said opening her eyes wide in emphasis. “She already invited me back for a possible threesome if things don’t work out with the brother.”

“Hmm,” he hummed in amusement. “Maybe I should check her out for myself.”

“I thought you were hung up on the other Fox sister?”

He took a pained breath and shrugged, “Yeah, well, according to Tim she’s marrying Wayne so that ship has pretty much sailed, hasn’t it?”

“Son of a—!” Her lips thinned angrily as she glared over at Tim but then she shook her head and offered him a sympathetic look, “You shouldn’t have found out like that but if it’s of any consolation, she’s still in love with you, too.”

“So it’s true?” He asked her and when she nodded he shifted uncomfortably before offering her a humorless smile, “If she’s so in love with me then why is she marrying him?”

“She’s in love with both of you; I’d think if anyone could appreciate that it’d be you,” she said pointedly. “As for why she’s marrying him; Ollie, he asked, you didn’t.”

“So you’re saying that if I asked her that I’d be the one getting married right now?” He asked mockingly.

“Yeah, pretty much,” she told him without a hint of sarcasm. “In fact, you could have her back anytime you wanted but we both know that you won’t ask her and that you can’t give her what he can even if you did.” His jaw clenched in reaction to that but she pressed on, “I’m not trying to hurt you, Ollie; this isn’t me kicking you while you’re down. Felicity knows that you’re not ready to give up the hood, that’s all. Not that she’d ever ask you to, but I know you well enough to know that
you’d spend the rest of your life feeling guilty over it. All you’d ever see is what she gave up to be with you; that he offered her kids, a home, even to give up his night job just so she’d stay with him, and all you can give her is this life.” She looked around the basement before turning back to him, “We both know this mission of yours doesn’t exactly come with a happily ever after attached.”

“He offered to give up being the Batman?” He asked in surprise. “And kids, really?”

“Yeah,” she snorted, “Felicity was kind of wigging out over the fact that he even picked out names already.”

“Are you shitting me?” Oliver asked, not the least bit amused.

“Nope,” Sara said with a smirk. “He had more than a half a dozen names picked out and told her he was willing to use them all if she was willing to stay knocked up for the next several years as they made their way down the list.”

“Bullshit, there’s no way Felicity would ever agree to that,” he scoffed.

“Maybe not enough to field a baseball team but who knows?” Sara told him, her eyes filled with sympathy. “Ollie, you and I saw different sides of Felicity. She might have been closer to you, but I’m the one she talked to about the stuff she couldn’t go to you with.”

“Like what?” He asked gruffly.

“Like how she loved her family and knew that they loved her but that she never felt like she belonged,” she said softly. “I mean, they’re great people; all of them, but for some reason she never felt like she had a real home until she met us--met you.”

Guilt crashed down on him then, a weight so heavy his shoulders sagged because of it, “Yeah, I—she told me that a few times, too.”

“Honestly, I think that’s half the reason she’s even entertaining the idea of marrying Bruce. It’s not about kids or giving up the mission for her; he offered her a home, the one thing she’s always wanted,” she shrugged, “Hard to turn something like that down.”

“Wait...but—is she marrying him or is she just thinking about it?” He asked with a frown.

“This conversation is getting a little middle school, don’t you think?” Sara said shaking her head. “Any minute now you’re going to have me deliver a note that says ‘Do you still like me, check yes or no’.” She snorted at her own joke, “You should really be talking to her about this, you know that right?”

Oliver grimaced, “Just tell me; how real is this thing between her and Wayne?”

“Honestly?” She asked then tilted her head, “I’m not sure but it’s real enough that I’m already signed on as a bridesmaid.” At his darkening look she sighed, “Look, she’s torn, okay? She loves you both but Bruce is almost twenty years into his mission and you’ve been at this less than four not including the time we spent on the island. He offered her a real place in his life and she knows that you can’t do that at this point in your mission, not now, but she’d still choose you if you chose her back.”

“She told you that?” He asked her quietly, a hint of vulnerability creeping in. When she nodded he asked, “And what did you say?”

“I told her to pick Bruce; that you were far from a sure thing. I told her to choose the love that chose her, which is him, not you. I’m sorry, but it’s the truth,” she said honestly. At the hint of anger in his
eyes, she sighed, “Ollie, you sent her away for a reason. You told her to move on so that’s what I told her to do.”

“Shit,” he clenched his jaw angrily before relaxing a bit and giving her an apologetic look even though he could still feel a knot of anger burning a hole in his stomach. He wasn’t angry at Sara though, he was angry at himself for ever letting it get this far, “You’re…you’re right. You were right to tell her to move on,” He scratched his beard, feeling the anger give way to pain, “And is she? Moving on?”

“I think she’s trying to figure it out,” Sara said noncommittally. “I’m heading back out tomorrow night to stay down there and help her with some stuff. She’s actually offered to take me on as a roommate so I’ll be sticking close to her, I promise. I’ll make sure she’s safe.”

“Wait,” something about the way she worded that ‘pinged his radar’ as Felicity used to say. “What stuff is she into that you feel the need to put down roots that close to her? I know damn well it can’t be the brother, so what’s going on?” He asked sharply, his attention now focused on something other than his own pain.

“Just…stuff,” she said, clearing her throat. “You know, if we don’t get to those doughnuts soon…”

“Tell me she isn’t investigating Stellmoor on her own.”

“Um, I can honestly say she isn’t investigating it on her own,” she told him.

“Goddamn it,” Oliver swore then leveled a glare in her direction. “You’re helping her with this?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “I’m already on the inside and she asked me for backup. What was I supposed to do, Ollie? Let her go in alone?”

“You should have stopped her from going there in the first place!” He said his voice elevated slightly.

At his angry exclamation the laughter stopped and several heads turned in their direction. Luke frowned and stood up, “Something wrong?”

“Apparently,” Oliver told him as he took several steps away from Sara with a scowl. “Did you know your sister was running her own op back in Gotham?”


Everyone but Barbara was focused on Sara. Barbara, on the other hand, was watching Tim, “Timmy,” she said quietly, “is there something you’d like to share with the rest of us?”

Everyone turned to Tim who shifted uncomfortably in his seat on the couch. He looked up at Sara with a perturbed expression on his face, “I thought we were supposed to keep this on the down-low for a couple of days?”

“Tim, I suggest you start talking right fucking now!” Luke gritted out, hands clenched at his sides.

“Is this the Stellmoor thing?” Diggle asked sharply.

“What’s Stellmoor and what does it have to do with my sister?” Luke asked, his expression stormy. “Someone better tell me what the hell is going on!”

“Stellmoor is the company that tried to take Queen Consolidated in a hostile takeover a few years
back,” Oliver told him. “At the time we didn’t know this but Stellmoor wanted QC for more than just its bottom line. Apparently they’re also the front for a global vigilante organization and they targeted me specifically because of the Arrow. Isabel told Felicity that she knew all about us, about Sara, and wanted to recruit her. Given Isabel’s history I took it as a threat and told Felicity to stay away from Isabel and anything to do with her company. Apparently,” he bit out, “she chose to ignore me and went ahead with an op of her own.”

“Is that true?” Luke asked angrily, turning to Sara.

“Yeah, but to be fair, I’ve worked with the organization you’re talking about and, although I’ve never had any contact with Isabel, I can tell you that from what I’ve seen so far the group does good work,” she told them. “They’re organized, well-funded, and they certainly don’t act like a villainous shadow group. In fact, they have an even bigger hate-on for Ra’s al Ghul and the League than you do.” She turned to Oliver, “They run a lot of missions but especially love to target anything League related, particularly anything to do with women and children. We recently busted a human trafficking ring in Paris just last week that had connections to a guy on your list.”

“Who?” Roy asked curiously.


Barbara, Tim, and Luke all reacted to that name simultaneously.

“Son of a bitch,” Tim muttered as Barbara winced noticeably.

“I thought that motherfucker had been put away for good?” Luke asked Barbara.

“Someone called the Black Mask sprang him from Arkham a while back and we lost track,” she told him. Barbara turned to Sara, “What happened to Zsasz?”

“Neutralized,” she told her with grim satisfaction.

“You killed him?” Tim asked her.

“Not me, a member of my team, but as team leader I made the call.” At the look of discomfort on the other’s expressions she grimaced, “Listen, I get that you guys don’t kill; despite what you may have heard, we,” she indicated Oliver and the rest of their team, “all of us have a ‘no kill unless’ policy about that kind of thing, and this was definitely an ‘unless’ situation,” she told them. “When we cornered him, he had a knife against the throat of a six year old child and was threatening to kill him then and there. One of my team had the shot and I told them to take it. Could we have taken him down using non-lethal means?” She shrugged, “Maybe; but it wasn’t worth risking the kid. He was saved and there’s one less monster in the world because of it.”

“Zsasz was a pedophile?” Diggle asked, looking grim.

“Among other things,” Tim said with a note of disgust. “He didn’t have actual sex with the kids, he was more of a,” his eyes closed and he swallowed, “I don’t know what the fuck to call him.”

“Canary was closer to the mark by calling him a monster,” Barbara said emphatically. “He was something twisted; calling him a pedophile is just the tip of the iceberg.”

“He got off on pain and causing pain,” Luke said in a growl. “He liked kids especially. He made his money by putting weapons in their hands and watching them kill each other like gladiators in the fucking arena; he got off on it. Little kids, too; practically babies. He used to invite people to bid on the action while he got his jollies watching them tear each other apart.”
“Oh my God,” Thea breathed. “That’s the sickest thing I have ever heard in my life.”

“Sounds to me like the son of a bitch needed to die,” Roy said coldly.

Luke nodded, “Pretty much. Kids, man,” he said angrily, “I can take a lot of shit but I can’t handle it when it involves kids.”

“I think we’re all on board with that sentiment,” Tim said in a subdued manner. “Bruce busted him and threw in in the deepest hole he could find in Arkham. When he escaped he about lost his shit over it.” He looked at Sara with a hint of respect in his eyes, “Look, I don’t really go for the whole killing thing; I’m more of a ‘lock them up and let them rot’, kind of guy. Still, I’m glad that son of a bitch is dead.”

“I agree, and I get that this group does some good, but I don’t trust Isabel Rochev,” Oliver said firmly, “especially when it comes to Felicity.”

“He’s right,” Diggle said, coming to stand beside him. “She hated Felicity and then, one day out of the blue, she just offers her a place on this team? Something’s up.”

“We’ve worked with Amanda Waller on several occasions and I know none of us exactly trust her either,” Sara pointed out. “Besides, it’s a moot point; Felicity was doing this with or without our help.”

“She’s right,” Tim said reluctantly. “I found out after the fact that she went in without back up at least once already.”

“What the hell?!” Luke thundered, a sentiment shared by several of the others in the room.

“Hey!” Sara said, getting their attention. “I already ripped into her for that and I imagine Tim did as well.”

“Damn straight,” Tim grumbled.

“Why the hell would she do something that stupid? When was this?” He demanded.

“I don’t know exactly but it was just after she came back to Gotham,” Sara told him. “Look, the thing we should be focusing on is that if they were going to hurt her she’d already be dead but they didn’t. She could have been killed a few weeks ago and none of us would have been any wiser.”

“And that’s supposed to cheer everyone up and fill me with confidence?” Luke spat out.

“No, but it does put some perspective on things,” she told him. “Believe it or not, your sister is tougher than you think she is. I’m not saying what she did wasn’t completely fucked in the head, but she handled it.”

“Does Wayne know she’s doing this?” Oliver asked.

Tim and Sara exchanged looks and Barbara snorted, “I think that the fact that we can’t hear him yelling all the way from Gotham means that the answer to that question is a resounding ‘no’.”

“When is she planning on going back inside?” Oliver asked sharply.

“Wednesday,” Tim answered. “She promised me she wouldn’t go back in without backup and she said Sara was coming back tomorrow.”

“Is that true?” Oliver asked her.
“I am planning on going back tomorrow, yes,” she told him blithely.

“Goddamn it!” Oliver said loudly, running his hand through his hair in agitation.

“Wait!” Tim said sharply, “She swore she wouldn’t make a move without someone there! I only agreed to come down here after she promised me that you had her back!”

“She has back up,” Sara told him.

“Who?” Luke demanded. “We’re all here; who the hell is acting as her back up?”

Sara and Barbara looked at each other and then at Tim and Luke pointedly.

“Tam?” Tim said incredulously.

“And you thought Tam could handle that?” Luke said in a near shout. He turned to Barbara, “What time is it?”

“Just after six so that means it’s already after nine am in Gotham,” she told him.

Tim brought out his phone, “I’m calling to scramble the Gulfstream now.”

“Excuse me,” Thea said, raising her hand to get their attention. “I realize that I’m not technically in the hero club since I’m still in training and all, but that’s at least a five or six hour flight; why can’t you just call this Bruce guy and have him handle it? I mean, he is right there, yeah?”

“A woman after my own heart; someone who actually knows how to use a phone,” Barbara said appreciatively in her direction. “I’m connecting to Bruce’s cell now.”

Bruce ran his hand through his hair, not caring if it left him looking disheveled. He’d been trying to get a moment alone with Lucius all morning but every time he thought he had the other man cornered something else would pop up. It was as though the universe was working against him.

First the nutcase with the goddamn parade float and the monkeys and now this.

Felicity was right; this was a shit day.

Part of him just wanted to say ‘to hell with it’, go back to the penthouse, kick Tam and the decorators out, and spend the rest of the day in bed with his woman. If Luke told their father before he had a chance to talk to him, so be it. He was done. He already had to endure the indignity of having Alfred hose him off in the Batcave that morning; if he had to listen to Irving Tumi from Finance talk in a monotone for even one more minute he was going to lose it and just throw in the towel.

Finally, the meeting broke up and Bruce took his chance, “Lucius, could I have a minute? I know that we have the meeting with Marketing next but I think we can skip it.” He turned to his Vice President of Finance, “Ms. Wells? Would you mind handling it for us?”

“Of course,” she turned to Lucius for confirmation.

“Go ahead, Kristen, we’ll try to be in there soon,” Lucius said good naturedly. “It’s got to be better than listening to your department head drone on all morning long about stock prices and inflation costs.”

“Marketing might be full of alarmists and drama queens but at least they keep it interesting,” she
agreed wryly. “As for Irving, I’ll tell him to try to work on his presentation a little. Maybe he can come in dressed as Humdrum the Accounting Clown next time just to shake things up.”

“I might actually be able to stay awake for that one,” Lucius chuckled. “Sound good to you, Bruce?”

“Sure,” Bruce said dryly. “Maybe we can even get an elephant to stand there and act as the screen for his PowerPoint presentation.”

“Or we can get some of those trained monkeys from this morning to hold up his pie charts,” Kristen said with a mischievous grin.

“Monkeys?” Lucius asked curiously as Bruce tried to stop himself from flinching.

“My girlfriend sent me an email with a YouTube link this morning,” she told him. “Hilarious! Apparently some nutcase—”

“Not to interrupt but you might want to get to that meeting before the Marketing guys start panicking,” Bruce cut in.

Kristen nodded, her eyes twinkling, “Yeah, right, you know how they are; the sky is always falling, hoarding all the lox and cream cheese when the bagel guy comes around. Wouldn’t want them to get into any monkey business. They might, I don’t know, totally lose it and start singing show tunes from parade floats or something.”

“Funny.” He really hated that Kristen knew his secret some days.

“I thought so,” she said with a smirk as she got up from her chair. “See you gentlemen in a few minutes.” She nodded to them both and headed out of his office towards the elevator.

“What can I do for you, Bruce?” Lucius asked as soon as she closed the door behind her.

Bruce looked at him and suddenly realized that the words he’d been practicing in his head for most of the night had completely abandoned him. He cleared his throat, wiping his hand over his mouth nervously, “I wanted to talk to you about your daughter…”

“I wanted to talk to you about that as well,” Lucius said with a scowl. “Specifically about her relationship with young Timothy.”

“Tim?” Bruce repeated blankly.

Lucius nodded, “Now, don’t get me wrong, I’m very fond of Tim, but I can’t say I care for this living arrangement he has going on with my daughter.” He made a disgruntled noise, “Now, I know they’re adults but I just don’t like the idea of the two of them shacking up when neither of them have even so much as come close to making any sort of commitment to each other. I mean, one minute they’re in a relationship and the next minute---” He made a harrumphing sound in his throat, “Call me old fashioned, but I just don’t like it and I told your boy that if he wanted to keep living in the condo I paid for then he better start making his intentions known once and for all! You know what I mean, right? You’re a father,” he said with a scowl. “If Tam, or better yet, Baby was your daughter wouldn’t you expect to have a man to man talk with the person they were seeing before they moved in together?”

He squinted a bit and shifted in his chair uncomfortably, “Well, um, I understand where you’re coming from, yes, but…”

“I know, I know,” Lucius said dismissively. “I come off as a bit of a hypocrite seeing as I lived with
Baby’s mother before we got married but that was different. I was committed to her, we weren’t just shacked up, and as soon as my divorce came through I married her. Look, nowadays I realize most young folks have this whole ‘marriage is obsolete’ attitude and, a few years back, you had this whole ‘playboy’ persona to keep up but hopefully, now that you’re getting older like the rest of us, you’re starting to see it from my point of view. I mean, according to Tam this thing between Dick and that girl he’s been seeing has been getting fairly serious; eventually you’re going to be a grandfather. Probably sooner than you think; you wouldn’t want to see your grandchildren raised in an unstable environment, would you?”

“Why does everyone keep telling me I’m on the verge of becoming a grandfather?” Bruce muttered.

“I’m not saying they’re ready for kids, but that’s why people get married and live together in the first place. It’s about making a commitment and I just can’t see either of them doing that. If you ask me they both need to either fish or cut bait. I’m not saying they need to get married but I’d at least feel better if I knew he was taking this relationship seriously. Plus there’s that whole other thing he’s involved with,” he gave Bruce a significant look. “I’d just like to know that he’s not playing things fast and loose and that he’s keeping her well-being in mind.”

“I agree,” Bruce said slowly, “and I will talk to Tim as soon as I get a chance; but what I really came to discuss was Ba-er, Felicity.”

He frowned, “What about her? Is this about the WayneTech thing you offered her? I thought she was taking that job with the charity instead?”

“No, she’s not taking that job anymore,” Bruce told him. “Lucius, I…”

“Are you sure?” Lucius asked, interrupting him. “Tam told me that she was going over there this morning to look over the facility.”

“Tam said what? When was this?” Bruce asked sharply, his previous train of thought completely abandoned.

“This morning,” Lucius told him. “I texted her to ask if she wanted to catch lunch after we met with the Entertainment division and she said Baby’s job called and asked if she could come by this morning so she did her sister a favor and took the day off to meet with the decorators at the penthouse. Is something wrong?” He asked curiously.

Bruce didn’t answer him right away. Instead he struggled to get his temper under control as he pasted a pleasant smile on his face, “No, no problem; I was just hoping to talk her into accepting my offer instead. I was under the impression that she was fully committed, in fact.”

“Maybe that’s why she’s going over there,” Lucius suggested. “She’s probably just letting them know that she won’t be taking the job after all. You know how considerate Baby is about that sort of thing.”

“Probably,” Bruce said neutrally. He got up from his chair. “I just remembered, I scheduled another meeting and it’s probably going to take most of the day. Do you mind if I let you and Ms. Wells handle things from here?”

“No problem,” Lucius said, getting up and heading for the door as well. “And if you could speak to Tim I’d appreciate it. I just want to keep my girls safe.”

“I agree with you perfectly,” Bruce said grimly. “Believe me.”
His cell rang and Bruce answered it by hitting a button on the steering wheel of the MacLaren, activating the Bluetooth speaker, “What?” He barked.

“Someone’s having a bad day,” Barbara said dryly.

“You have no idea,” Bruce said grimly as he headed straight for the Wayne Foundation.

“Well, hate to break it to you but it’s about to get a whole lot worse,” she told him. “Baby has apparently been working her own op on the down low and without backup.”

“I heard,” he bit out, swerving around a Yellow Cab. “I’m heading to Tam now to find out what the hell is going on.”

“She’s not going to be able to tell you anything.” Another feminine voice came on the line; one he didn’t immediately recognize but he could guess who it was.

“Canary, I presume,” he growled. “Did she tell you where she was going?”

“No, all I know is she’s heading for one of their facilities,” she told him. “I’ve never been there so I really can’t tell you where it is. Felicity was supposed to meet me Wednesday and we were going to go in together.”

“Oracle; try pinging her phone,” he ordered.

“Already did that and nothing,” Barbara told him.

“She told me the facility is shielded. No signals can get in or out unless it’s through their servers,” he heard Tim say.

“How long did you know this was going on and why the hell didn’t you tell me about it sooner?” Bruce practically growled.

“I tried to talk her out of it,” Tim said bitterly.

“Apparently not well enough!” Bruce snapped at him.

“Hey, she’s your fiancée, not mine!” Tim retorted.

Bruce slammed on the brakes as he came to a crosswalk and impatiently waited for the pedestrians to clear the road. It was unfair of him to blame Tim, especially since he, himself, had heard her plans and had failed to make her listen to reason. Still…

Wait, Tim just said… “Goddamn it!” He let out a frustrated breath, “Does Luke know?”


“Everyone knows,” Oliver said in the background.

“Felicity is getting married to Batman?” Another unknown female said in the background. “Cool beans!”

“Now everyone knows,” Diggle said wryly.

“Can I be a bridesmaid?” She said, speaking again to someone on the other end of the line.

“I think we’re all supposed to be bridesmaids,” Canary said dryly. “You too, Barbara.”
“Goody goody gumdrops,” his tech muttered sarcastically. “I’ll worry about butt bows and catching the bouquet after we pull the bride’s ass out of the fire.”

“Do you need us down there?” Oliver asked agitatedly.

“I don’t know yet,” Bruce said shortly. “According to Felicity the compound is pretty well guarded so I may very well need the entire team. I’ll call Nightwing and have him come down from Bludhaven; in the meantime have a jet on standby.”

“Wait, so you knew about this and let it happen anyway?” Queen spat out angrily. “What the hell has been going on over there?”

Bruce tightened his hands on the steering wheel and let his right foot fall heavily on the accelerator as soon as the pedestrians were clear, “Not that I need to explain anything to you, Queen, but she came to me about this the other day and I specifically told her to drop it. I thought I had talked her out of going back there!”

“Hello, point of order!,” The unknown female broke in again, “Why are you guys freaking out and acting as though she’s been kidnapped or something? Didn’t Sara just finish telling you that these were the good guys?”

“Who is that?” Bruce asked irritably.

“Hi, I’m Thea, Ollie’s sister,” she chirped in a clearer tone than before. “I’m a hero too—sort of.”

“Why are you waving at the monitor?” An exasperated male voice asked. “It’s a phone call; he can’t actually see you.”

“Shut up, Roy!” She said grumpily. “Excuse me if I’m a little excited, okay? I’ve never talked to a real live superhero before.” There was a murmur of voices and she added, “I meant other than you guys.”

“As enjoyable as this little group hug is, I’m in a bit of a rush here,” Bruce said in the voice of the Bat. “Felicity’s life is at stake!”

“Yes, it is!” Queen broke in sharply, “Glad to see you’re finally realizing that since it’s your fault for not keeping her safe in the first place!”

“I was keeping her safe!” Bruce said angrily as he dodged a bike messenger. “You sent her with me because this mess started on your end, remember?”

“That’s enough from both of you!” Canary’s voice broke in, “Look, I’ve worked with these people and I can tell you that chances are she’s safe but if you try to break into one of their facilities half-cocked then that could change really quickly.”

“I’m aware of that,” Bruce told her. “I still need to know where she is.”

“She told me she set up an alarm inside of Watchtower to go off at a certain time with the address of the facility if she doesn’t make her check in,” Tim told him.

“I’m on it but if Baby buried it, it could take a while,” Barbara said and he could hear the clacking of the keys as she began to hack into the system.

“I still can’t believe all of you kept this from me,” Luke said angrily. “You should have told me Baby was in trouble!”
“I still can’t believe you guys call Felicity ‘Baby’ and get away with it,” the man who Queen’s sister identified as ‘Roy’ said drolly.

“Seconded,” Thea said with an amused snort. “I’m surprised she hasn’t kicked all of your asses over that. I know I would have.”

“She swore me to secrecy, dude,” Tim said with a sigh. “I knew I should have stayed in Gotham. I can’t believe she lied to me like that.”

“She didn’t lie to anyone,” Sara said reasonably.

“She didn’t tell the truth either,” Oliver said, his own voice harsh. “I’ll have the jet on stand-by; you just say the word and we’ll be there,” he told him. “If need be I have the contact information for another mask called The Flash. He can be there to act as backup long before we can get there in the jet.”

“I’ll let you know if it comes to that, until then I need to keep this line clear. Batman out,” he said, clicking off the phone call just as he pulled into the underground parking structure. He immediately headed for the private elevator and hit the button to the penthouse. As soon as he got upstairs he strode into the apartment, his eyes locked on Tam who was directing the workmen in a flurry of activity while flipping through a bridal magazine, “Where in the hell is Felicity?” He said in a near shout.

Tam turned to him, her expression calm as she lifted one eyebrow at his obvious state of agitation, “And a good morning to you, too.”

Bruce looked around at the many workmen who were staring at them in obvious trepidation. He grabbed Tam by the arm, causing her to drop her magazine, and hauled her into his office before slamming the door behind him, “Cut the crap,” he said as he released her. “Where is Felicity?”

“I have no idea,” Tam told him blithely.

Bruce got in her personal space, his face a mask of rage, “Goddamn it, Tam; Felicity is in danger!”

“First off, back the hell up off me,” Tam said reasonably although there was a spark of anger in her tawny gaze. “I don’t give a shit who you are; I don’t play that way and I will put you on your ass in a heartbeat.”

Fighting the urge to grab her and shake her until her teeth rattled, Bruce took a step back and fixed his angry gaze upon her, “Where is Felicity?” He asked in a quieter, though no less intense, registry.

“She didn’t tell me specifically because she didn’t want me to be able to tell you,” she said in an unaffected tone. “The only thing I know is that she’s planning on checking in when she’s done and if she isn’t out by a certain time an alert will go off letting everyone know her location.”

“Did she say anything else?” He asked, glaring down at her. “Anything at all?”

“Only that it’s somewhere in the East End,” she told him.

“That isn’t enough information to go on!” He spat out, running his hand through his hair in agitation. “Think! What else did she tell you?”

“God, you’re so rude,” Tam told him then bit her lip as she narrowed her eyes and appeared to search her memory, “Well, there was the DJ guy she met.”
“DJ?” Bruce prompted.

“Yeah, he calls himself ‘Mr. Mention’ and he spins at the Irie Club in Little Jamaica. He drives a cab and she said he gave her his card afterwards to get us in. I think he’s the one who drove her there.”

“Do you have his card?” He asked her.

“No, Felicity gave it to the bouncer when we got to the club,” she told him, obviously starting to get concerned herself. “You could try tracking him down by calling there,” She suggested then bit her lip. “Of course, they probably don’t open until later tonight.”

Bruce spun on his heel without another word and headed out of the office, Tam close on his heels.

“Wait! Where are you going?” She asked but he didn’t answer her. Instead he stomped past all the workmen and headed out the door and into the elevator.

“Your sister’s fiancé is pretty intense,” Zander said as he approached her, handing her back her discarded magazine as they watched the doors close.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “But he sure can fill out a suit. Even if he is a total ass,” she added as an afterthought.

“And what an ass it is, girlfriend,” Zander said lowly.

Tam just grinned at him as they exchanged a quick high-five.

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Bruce drove straight to the Batcave after calling Alfred to let him know what was happening and for him to track down the cabbie using the information Tam had given him. His next call was to Dick who picked up on the second ring.

“Grayson.”

“I need you back in Gotham ASAP,” he told him, getting straight to the point.

“What’s up? I’m kind of in a meeting.”

“I think Baby might have gotten herself into trouble,” he said tersely. “Tim, Luke, and Barbara are in Starling and if things get sticky I’m going to need you on deck.”

“Details?” He asked, all business.

“I’ll brief you when you get here.”

“Okay,” he told him. “Be there in a couple of hours.”

“Take a chopper,” he told him. “We might not have that kind of time.”

“How bad is it?” Dick asked quietly.

“I don’t know yet,” he said grimly. “I can’t even get a location on her; all I know is that she’s being held in a facility by suspected hostiles and the building is surrounded by snipers and top of the line security measures.”

He heard Dick exhale then speak again, “Okay, I’ll head over to the helipad now.”
“Thanks,” he said and clicked off. As soon as he hung up on Dick the phone rang and the Bluetooth picked up. “What do you have?”

Alfred’s voice came through the speakers, “I was unable to locate the owners of the club Miss Tam mentioned as they are closed today but I called Miss Barbara and she said she would try to hack into their employee records and get back to you momentarily. What’s your ETA to the Batcave, sir?”

“Less than two minutes,” he said hanging up just as he roared into the drive and parked in the front of the manor. He jogged up the front steps and strode forcefully across the hallway into the main library. He went up to the grandfather clock and jerked open the glass case, setting the hour and minute hands to 10:47 then set the moon phase on ‘night’.

As soon as the hidden door behind the grandfather clock slid open he hurried down the steps where Alfred was sitting in front of the Watchtower console, “Has Barbara found anything yet?”

“Just give me a minute, would you,” Barbara said irritably from the large monitor in the center of the Watchtower station. Much to Bruce’s growing irritation several people, including a few he had never met, were crowded around Barbara and looking on with expressions ranging from anger to concern to outright curiosity.

“That’s Batman?” A young brunette said, rubbernecking as she struggled to break through the wall of bodies surrounding Barbara. “Nice.”

“He can hear you,” a dark haired young man muttered from beside her.

“He’s still cute,” she said with an appreciative look.

“And he can still hear you,” the dark haired man muttered as he rubbed his eyes wearily.

“What’s the hold up?” Bruce snapped impatiently, ignoring the distracting pair in the background.

“Hold on for one goddamn minute, Bruce! I only have two hands and this nightclub’s server is from the ‘90’s. It’s like trying to communicate in ancient Greek!” she told him crossly. “Also, do you even know how many people drive cabs in Gotham? Here! I crosschecked the employee records with persons owning hack licenses and came up with a name: Dontae Glover. Dialing it now.”

“Hello?” A heavily accented voice came over the line.

“Is this Mr. Glover, also known as Mr. Mention?” Bruce asked smoothly.

“Yes, dat be me; who’re you?”

Ignoring the question, Bruce continued, “Mr. Glover, you had a fare last week; a young lady you picked up in front of Wayne Towers. She’s missing and her family is very worried about her. I don’t suppose you remember where it was that you dropped her off?”

“You dah cops?” He asked suspiciously then sighed, “Mon, you know how many people I pick up in dat part of town? I’m sorry dat de girl be missin’ but I can’t help you.”

“She was blonde, around 5’5”, attractive, wears glasses; she would have asked to be dropped off somewhere on the East End,” Bruce said insistently.

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the phone, “I’m sorry, mon; I don’t know…”

Bruce’s jaw clenched, “Please, Mr. Glover; anything you can remember could be of vital importance
to our investigation.” Something occurred to him, “You gave her your business card.”

“You know how many cards I give out to pretty young blondes, mon?” He chuckled. “Dey don’ call me Mr. Mention for nut’thing.”

“She and a group of her friends went to watch you spin at the Irie Club last weekend,” he told him, frustration curdling his stomach.

“Nah mon, I don’—wait,” he said thoughtfully. “Dere was one girl; great tipper, cute little bit of a ting, too. Blonde wit glasses like you said. She wan’ me to drop her off near dah Crime Alley but I didn’t feel right leavin’ her like dat. I gave her my card and picked her up later dat day. Don’ know if it’s dah same girl doh.”

“Do you remember where you dropped her off?” He asked quickly.

“Yeah, I tink it was…” He paused, “Yeah, it was dat ole chemical factory; uh, Axis someting.”

“Son of a—,” Tim cursed from the monitor. “Of all the fucking places…”

“Thank you,” Bruce said grimly as he ended the call. He wiped his hand across his mouth and paced agitatedly as he absorbed that information.

“What does that mean?” Oliver asked from the monitor. “What’s Axis?”

“The black hole of everything fucked up in the universe,” Barbara said tersely as she began typing furiously again.


“The Joker?” Diggle asked with a start. “That maniac who dresses like a clown?”

“Does he have her?” Oliver asked, his voice dropping to the growl of the Arrow.

“No, no way,” Tim said quickly. “Joker is dead; at least we’re pretty sure he’s dead. Even so, he wouldn’t go after Baby; she shouldn’t even be on his radar.”

“Besides, it’s not his style,” Bruce said at last. “If he had Felicity he would have made himself known by now. Subtlety was never his thing.”

“I found the property records for Axis,” Barbara spoke up. “Not surprisingly it’s passed through quite a few hands over the years before finally being seized by the government after the last owner failed to pay his property taxes.” Her eyes scanned the screen before her, “The last owner of the property is listed as Sterling/Gates Ltd which is a front for Homeland Security.”

“Homeland?” Diggle asked sharply. “ARGUS?”

“Good guess,” Barbara told him. “Hacking into ARGUS now.” She shook her head, “Damn, would you look at that? Baby already has this thing set up to go right through their back door. I love that girl; seriously. After you finish spanking her little tushie I’m going to give her a big kiss on the lips!”

“Oracle, focus!” Bruce snapped at her.

“Don’t get your Bat panties in a wad,” she told him, unperturbed by his gruffness. “Apparently the property was undergoing renovations; a lot of renovations,” she said with a low whistle. “State of the art everything, but they lost their funding after they tried to blow up Starling City during the Blood
Army thing. Apparently the Congressional oversight committee handing out the checks decided not to sink more money into them after they tried to blow up a ton of voters without authorization; especially during an election year. Waller is lucky to still have a job after that. Since then a new organization has risen up and has been giving them some competition.”

“The Orbital Organization,” Sara supplied.

“Bingo,” Barbara told her. “They’re set up a lot differently than ARGUS but with similar goals in mind. Also Waller really doesn’t like them. She has files and files on their movements and missions. It could take a while to sort through them and I don’t know how much longer I can keep the back door open without anyone noticing. The gist of it is that they came out of nowhere about a year ago and they’ve been snatching government contracts out from under ARGUS ever since, slowly pecking away at their powerbase. The property came under their banner around six months ago but has only been active for less than three months.”

“So they’re legit?” Luke asked, his brow furrowed in thought.

“Eh,” Barbara said noncommittally, “In as much as any super-secret black ops organization can be. Unlike ARGUS they’re privately held so they don’t answer to oversight but, at the same time, they don’t receive direct funding either. Instead they bid on contracts, bounties, etc. That’s the reason they’re gaining in favor among the Washington bean counters; built in plausible deniability at rock bottom prices.”

“How is it we’re only just hearing about them now?” Bruce asked heatedly. “They’ve been in my city, right under my nose, for months!”

“I sent Felicity to you because you said you could keep her safe,” Oliver said grimly from the other side of the monitor. “Now I come to find out that the very people I was trying to protect her from were sitting at your back door this entire time!”

“I’m not the one who got her shot, Queen! I’m also not the one who allowed someone to take a contract out on her life eighteen months ago and not even have a clue about it!” Bruce turned his furious gaze on the other man, his clenched fists coming down on the workstation as he spoke through gritted teeth.

“I may not have always protected her the way I should have, but she didn’t go joining any secret organizations under my watch either!” He thundered back. “You were supposed to keep her safe and from what I can see you’ve been doing a piss poor job of it so far!”

“Oh really? And what happened to her six months ago on your watch?” Bruce raged. “What the hell did you put her through that’s so bad she can’t even talk about it; that has her so scared she trembles like a goddamn leaf every time she even tries?!”

Oliver’s face became a mask of hatred and Sara quickly stepped in, “Hey! Cool it!” She told both of them. “The two of you need to chill the fuck out and listen!” As they both stopped to glower at her she spoke, “I haven’t been with the OO long but, like I said, so far they haven’t done anything I’d consider nefarious. Of course, my dealings with them have been limited to a few contracts over the last three months or so. If you ask me, we should just stick to Felicity’s plan and hold tight until she checks in. She’s got a pretty good head on her shoulders and, if she runs into trouble, her alerts will go off and we’ll know something’s up.”

“I’m not sitting around doing nothing while Felicity is in the custody of some pseudo government agency,” Bruce growled.
“I’m not saying you should,” she told him. “You said you’ve got some backup headed your way?”

“Nightwing. He should be here in an hour or so,” he told her.

“You two set up surveillance around the warehouse,” she told him. “Wait for her to contact us and, if
the alert goes off, you can try to breach then. Her alert doesn’t go off until after six so, in the
meantime, some of us will head back to Gotham while Dig and Oliver track Isabel’s movements
from here.”

“I’m not staying here while Felicity’s life is in danger,” Oliver bit out.

“She’s right,” Dig said, putting a calming hand on his shoulder. “You and I need to stay and monitor
the situation here and if things go bad then we should head out. Until then,” he said as he looked at
Bruce pointedly, “as far as we know Felicity is fine. Panicking about this doesn’t help anyone.”

“I’m coming back with Canary,” Tim said quickly.


“No,” Bruce said calmly but in the dark aspect of the Bat. “Canary and Mr. Diggle are right; we
have to be rational about this.” He loosened his collar and tie then looked up at the monitor. “Red
Robin and Oracle need to stay on mission with the Arrow in Starling.” Tim began to protest but
Bruce cut him off, “You were sent there to act as the representative for WayneTech; if you leave
suddenly and without an explanation it will only draw more suspicion. Batwing, you come back with
Canary on the jet. Alfred will contact the pilot and have them waiting for you on the tarmac.”

Sara nodded, “Sounds like a—” Her phone rang and she looked down, her expression turning to one
of surprise. “It’s Felicity.”

“Answer it and put it on speaker,” Bruce said tersely, leaning in.

“Patching it through Watchtower—er, LAIR now,” Oracle said tapping a few keys and rerouting the
call.

As soon as the phone picked up, Sara answered, “Hey Cutie, what’s up?”

------Translations from Kanji into English------
*(I trust this woman. She has a pure soul. She is different. However, she does not recognize the
dangers around her. I feel the great evil of the other)*

**(Many dark forces surround her. I fear for her safety. Darkness pursues her. She is beset on all
sides. My blade must capture this great evil before it is too late.)*
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Felicity started to follow Isabel into Cyber-Ops when the other woman turned suddenly and blocked her, “You know, I changed my mind; you and I should go over the mission first before we talk to the others.”

“What about the briefing?” She asked in mild confusion.

“It can wait,” Isabel said with a slightly off intonation. “Besides, you’re going to be this facility’s new director. You and I should discuss it first and then we’ll both brief the group together. That way we appear to be a united front.”

“Okay,” Felicity said slowly. Isabel was definitely up to something.

“Also, you should call your friend, Canary, in personally,” she said with an odd little smirk.

“What?” Felicity asked in confusion.

“For the mission,” Isabel expanded. “She has expertise in this particular type of fieldwork that might prove instrumental in retrieving the package.”

“What package?” She said, not trusting the other woman’s tone. “I don’t even know what the mission is yet.”

She motioned for her to follow her back to the desk and had her sit as she brought back up the large monitor. “An information broker by the name of Brian Durlin is holed up in a safe house in Svyatoy Nos near Lake Baikal in Siberia. He’s on the Most Wanted list of almost every federal agency you can think of but, most importantly, he’s in the crosshairs of both the League of Shadows and ARGUS. Right now he’s on the run and hiding from Ra’s al Ghul. It’s believed that Durlin has information that could prove invaluable in our mission to take them down. If we fail and Waller gets to them first, she’ll just retcon him, stick a bomb in his spine, and force both of them to join her little Suicide Squad. If Ra’s gets to them first…well, they’ll wish they had a bomb in their spines,” she said dryly. “We’re sending in a five man team to bring them in so we can get that information first before Waller buries it or Ra’s buries him.”

Felicity nodded as she sat in the chair across from her, “Who’s ‘them’? He has a partner?”

“He does; one that complicates matters somewhat,” She said picking up the tablet she was using earlier. The large screen lit up and surveillance footage of two men came into view; one large auburn-haired man who looked like he could take out an entire football team single-handedly and a blond man who was shorter and slighter than his companion but still very fit and muscular.

“Wow, who’s the Jolly Red Giant?” Felicity asked quietly.

“Aleksandr Creote, ex-Spetsnaz, or more accurately a former specialist with Spetsgruppa Alpha, and hired enforcer of our target,” she told her. “He’s also his bodyguard, partner in crime, and nursemaid.”

“Nursemaid?” She asked faintly, suddenly picturing the huge man who had to be barking at seven foot tall in a nurse’s uniform and crepe soled shoes. “He has a nurse who was a former member of FSB Special Forces?”

She nodded, “Durlin has a medical condition related to a memory disorder called hyperthymestic syndrome that’s caused by a chemical imbalance. He can’t really forget anything but, at the same time, his memory is non-linear with brief bouts of temporary amnesia and he hallucinates if he goes off his meds.”
“Like a computer with an overtaxed hard drive,” she said, examining his picture more carefully.

Isabel gestured toward the giant Russian who looked like a wall of muscle, “Creote serves as both his protector and touchstone. Things that happened to Durlin four years ago will suddenly be remembered as happening in the present and he has a hard time dealing with concepts like cause and effect.”

“Meaning?” She asked with a frown.

Isabel sighed irritably, “Meaning that he considers himself to be a vigilante of sorts but there is a disconnect between intent and results.”

“What, like putting a cat up a tree just so he can rescue it?” Felicity asked sardonically as she accepted the tablet from the other woman and began to read through the file.

Isabel took on a dour expression, “For a brief time he decided to try his hand as a mask; it was before he met Creote so he had no one there to keep him stabilized. He was pursuing a serial arsonist who set fire to an apartment building. Rather than put out the fire or get the victims to safety, he focused on catching the firebug. All he had to do was pull a fire alarm but it never occurred to him to do so. Shortly after that he was placed in a mental hospital which is where he learned that his true talents lay in blackmail and information brokering. He met Creote and hired him to be his muscle and stabilizing influence. In no time he was able to use his unique medical condition to his advantage. He sells secrets to the highest bidder, blackmails others, making him a powerful enemy or asset depending on your point of view.”

“So you want to send in a team to capture him, bring him here, and avoid the big guy,” Felicity said with a frown as she flipped through the satellite images of their safe house; a nicely appointed home built on the edge a cliff overlooking Lake Baikal, a gorgeous clear blue-green freshwater rift lake in southern Siberia, between the Irkutsk Oblast to the northwest and the Buryat Republic to the southeast.

“No,” Isabel told her. “In order to get what we need out of Durlin we have to have Creote as well which means that we need to bring in both men, unharmed.”

“Okay,” Felicity said looking at the Russian man’s image dubiously. “Says here he’s 6’8”, 320 pounds, trained in advanced hand to hand combat, counter-terrorism tactics, urban warfare, and checks out as an expert marksman in everything from sniper rifles to throwing knives with a particular fondness for explosives.” She cleared her throat, “Who exactly are you planning to send in after them?”

“First off is Tatsu Yamashiro, codename Katana,” Isabel said, queuing up her file. “Besides being the interim director here at the Gotham OO, she’s a skilled tactician and proficient in hand to hand combat and swordsmanship. She’s a bit odd but perfect for the role of team leader on this mission.”

Felicity eyed the other woman carefully, “She seemed pretty normal to me.”

Isabel raised one eyebrow slightly, “Odd may be the wrong word for it. She has a sort of tic.”

“A tic?” She repeated dubiously.

“She talks to her sword,” Isabel said in an exasperated tone.

“She talks to her sword,” Felicity pursed her lips as she considered that for a moment.

The other woman made a dismissive gesture, “It’s apparently a samurai thing. It’s not important;
merely a tic as I said.”

“Well, most of the masks I’ve known are a bit on the weird side anyway,” Felicity muttered. “Who else?”

“A meta-human by the name of Cynthia Reynolds, codename Gypsy; she has the ability to create elaborate illusions with her mind and has a kind of limited telepathy that allows her to shield herself and her companions from being noticed,” Isabel said, and the next screen showed a young girl in her late teens/early twenties with long inky black hair, dark eyes, and olive skin. “Her abilities are purely passive for the most part, although she can sometimes project fear into her adversaries but it’s extremely taxing afterwards and leaves her vulnerable. She’s been trained in hand to hand combat, small weapons fire, and has an affinity for acrobatics and electronics.”

“The camouflaging abilities will come in especially handy given the lack of cover in the area,” Felicity said thoughtfully as she pulled the satellite images back up on the big monitor. “Durlin might be a little whack-a-doo but he picked a good place for a safe house.” She gestured around the large stone cottage in question, “Sheer drop from a two hundred foot tall cliff on the back and no entry points from either side meaning their enemies have no choice but to come at them from the front. Who else?”

“The last three members of the team are people you’re already familiar with,” Isabel said with a slightly smug twitch of her lips. “Canary, of course. Her skills as a former assassin will help in getting in and out quietly. Lyla Michaels—”

“Lyla is a member of the OO?” Felicity said in surprise.

Isabel nodded with a smirk, “After she left ARGUS last year we recruited her. It seems she’s about as fond of Amanda Waller as we are. She abandoned the codename ‘Harbinger’ and took up the name ‘Lady Blackhawk’ instead. I believe it’s a nod to her former career in the Special Forces. In addition to bringing the skills she learned both with the Rangers and ARGUS, she’ll act as the team’s pilot.”

Felicity filed that information away, deciding to call Dig about it later when she was back at the alternate Batcave and on a secured channel. “Who’s the fifth member of the team?”

Isabel’s smile grew even wider and Felicity’s heart sank.

“Huntress.”

“Hey Cutie, what’s up?” Sara said cheerfully as Barbara routed the call through the LAIR system.

“Hey, Little Bird,” Felicity said.

Oliver and Dig frowned at one another in silence at the odd endearment but Sara’s eyes sharpened intently as she stared at the bank of monitors with Wayne’s image glaring down at them.

“I know you said you were going to take a few days of R and R but I need you to come in for an assignment.”

Sara gave Batman a slight nod, her face an intense mask of concentration but her tone casual and flirty, “Anything to be near you, Cutie Patootie; whatcha got?”

“I need you here for a team briefing by 18:00 hours Gotham time and then we’re going wheels up at
24:00 so you have time to coordinate with your team. Isabel has authorized the use of one of the Queen jets. It’s already on the tarmac waiting for you.” Her voice was crisp, professional, but there was a tiny bit a stress mixed in that someone who wasn't familiar with Felicity might easily dismiss.

As Oliver glanced around the room he realized that each and every person there had, in fact, picked up on the slight shift in her normal speaking voice as he had. Luke was steadily clenching and unclenching his fists while Tim stood stone-faced beside Barbara. Wayne just looked like he was about to explode.

Isabel, Oliver thought angrily as he ground his teeth together. Had to be. Chances are she was monitoring the call. He glanced at Barbara and the woman nodded letting him know she was hiding their location in case Isabel tried tracking her phone.

Not that it mattered since she apparently already knew everything. A muscle jumped in his temple and he could feel the beginnings of a migraine coming on.

“What’s the assignment and who’s on the team?” Sara asked stepping a little closer to the workstation as though offering comfort to the woman on the other end of the line.

“Katana, Lady Blackhawk, Gypsy, and an old friend of ours; Huntress,” Felicity said in a tone that clearly telegraphed her displeasure to all who might be listening.

Both Oliver and Wayne reacted with a start; Diggle placing a warning hand on his shoulder and Wayne running his hand over his mouth angrily as he began to pace.

“Isabel wants me to take that psycho-bitch on an assignment?” Sara said flatly. “Does she know she’s fucking insane and that she tried to kill my sister once and you twice?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line, “Believe me, I brought that up,” Felicity said with a sigh. “Sweetheart…”

Everyone in the room looked around in confusion at the intimate tone Felicity was using toward Sara and Wayne spun around suddenly; his expression would have been comical were the situation not so tense.

“…I know we talked about how our break up wouldn’t affect our working relationship…”

Oliver's jaw dropped in surprise and from the corner of his eye he could see Thea mouth ‘What. The. Hell?’ to Roy while Sara rocked back on her heels slightly and adopted a look of consternation.

“…and you know I still love you, I always will. We may not be together anymore but I still consider you to be my best friend and I told you that at the airport. Even if we can’t go back to the way things were, you know I’d never put you in a situation like this if there was any other way around it.”

Sara nodded to herself as if understanding what it was Felicity was attempting to communicate, “And you know I wouldn’t have kissed you like that if I didn’t still love you, as well.”

Everyone’s head whipped around to stare at Sara in shock.

“I think that’s something best left to discuss later in private,” Felicity said quietly.

“Just tell me what you need, Baby,” Sara said with an intense look of concentration. “What can I do to fix this?”

“You can’t,” Felicity told her. “Sometimes it’s a matter of choosing the person who chooses you,
you know? Sometimes it simply comes down to self-preservation.”

Oliver started again and Diggle squeezed his shoulder harder to remind him to keep his cool.

“I understand,” Sara said, her voice taking on a slightly hurt tone even though her expression hadn’t changed. “However, when I get back from this assignment I have to warn you that I’ll do whatever it takes to win back your trust, even if that means moving back to Gotham permanently and joining the OO full time. It’s been positively grim without you, Baby. We’ve only been officially over for less than twenty-four hours and I feel like I’ve spent half the morning scrambling for reasons to come get you,” she chuckled. “You know how I am with the big romantic gestures? Well, I couldn’t help myself; I totally broke down and ordered you enough flowers that it’s probably going to take every member of the Gotham Rogues and the Starling Comets just to deliver them! We’re talking red roses, fox gloves, and even those big stargazer lilies you love so much. I even ordered you those chocolates you liked, remember? We found them at that little shop in Bludhaven. Expect your apartment to be full when you get home.”

“That…wasn’t necessary,” Felicity said, her voice a bit strained. “I never needed the big gestures, just you.”

“I know that, babe, but you’re worth fighting for,” she said seriously. “Where you go, I go; I want you to know that I meant it when I told you I’m ready to leave Starling City behind and give you and this relationship 100%. Until then, whether we’re together or not, make sure to tell Isabel that you’re still my bitch. Until I get the chance to state my case at least one more time, nobody gets to grab that ass but me.”

Felicity cleared her throat, “Um, I kind of think that would count as sexual harassment now that we’re going to be working together.”

“Well, well; you always told me that you liked the way I sexually harassed you the best,” Sara said flirtatiously.

“And you promised you’d always kiss me even after I ate chili and onions,” Felicity shot back.

“I meant it, too,” Sara told her. “What’s the assignment, Baby?”

“You and the rest of the team will get a full briefing when you get here.” Suddenly Isabel’s voice came over the line, causing Oliver to mutter ‘son of a bitch’ under his breath quietly. From the look on Dig’s face he returned the sentiment.

“I take it this is Isabel?” Sara said coolly.

“It is,” came her slightly chilly reply, although there was a hint of triumph in her tone. “For now I’ll give you the same quick rundown we’ve given the rest of the team; it’s a five-man extraction squad to retrieve two packages from Svyatoy Nos, Siberia.”

“And in what condition do you want those packages delivered?” Her voice changing from Sara to Canary the second Isabel came on the line.

“Intact,” she said succinctly. “The jet is already waiting for you and there will be a car at the airport to pick you up and bring you to our Gotham facility.”

“That’s not necessary; I can catch a cab. Just give me the address,” The words were spoken with a casual inflection but there was no way Isabel could mistake the chill behind them.

“I insist,” Isabel said with false sweetness. “After all, you are a valued member of our team and,
besides, you’re obviously still very dear to our Felicity.”

The way she said ‘our’ seemed to raise everyone’s hackles, including Sara’s. Her jaw tightened and, for a second there, she looked every inch the assassin. “Yes, well, my Felicity is very dear to me as well. She is, after all, my girlfriend.”

“Oh?” Isabel said with some amusement. “That’s odd; I was under the impression that she had ended the romantic side of your relationship. Perhaps when you get here we should go over some human resources paperwork.”

“I wasn’t aware you had a human resources department at the OO,” Sara said with false levity.

“Oh, we do. We even offer a nice benefits package, but only to our full-time operators. If you’re as committed to ‘your’ Felicity as you say you are, I expect you’ll do as you mentioned and consider a more permanent position here,” Isabel said with saccharine sweetness. “That is, of course, if you can manage to part from ‘your’ dear Oliver…or is it your sister’s turn with him this week?”

Sara looked ready to blow when Felicity quickly spoke up, “Okay, let me let you go and I’ll see you in a few hours, okay?”

“Yeah,” Sara practically growled. “See you then, babe.”

“Okay…” Barbara logged off the call and swung her chair around, observing all of the tense expressions around her. “That was both educational and informative.”

“Yeah, now I know what Felicity meant when she referred to Isabel as the ‘Perestroik-cunt’,” Sara said irritably before turning her attention to Oliver. “Seriously, how the hell did you manage to avoid getting frostbite on your dick after scoring a Gordie Howe hat trick in that bitch’s ass?”

“Now’s not the time Sara,” Oliver said tersely.

Tim scratched his head and cleared his throat nervously, “You know, if it wasn’t Baby and this situation weren’t so tense, that conversation would have been totally hot.”

“What the hell was that?” Batman demanded from the monitors.

“Just a little code Felicity and I worked out on the spur of the moment based on some recent conversations,” Sara said calmly even though Oliver could still see the anger burning in her eyes.

“You kissed Felicity?” Oliver burst out before he could stop himself.

“Yeah, I was hoping someone would get around to asking that before me,” Roy muttered in embarrassment right before Thea punched him on the arm.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Diggle was barely keeping his smile in check as he looked between the open-mouthed shock on Oliver’s face to the black look of anger Bruce Wayne was shooting Sara. “I think we should focus on the more pressing issue here,” he said, schooling his expression. “From what I could follow from that not so subtle ‘code’ of yours, you let Felicity know that both teams were aware she was inside of this organization and were ready to mobilize on her location and she, in turn, told you she was fine and that she needed you there but further backup wouldn’t be necessary, correct?”

“Yup,” Sara told him. “However you didn’t have to be insulting about it; I thought it was pretty damn subtle given that I had to completely pull it out of my ass like that.”
“Red roses, fox gloves, and stargazer lilies? And I’m not even going to mention the thing with the two football teams,” Diggle said with a sarcastic edge.

“All I could think of was that or birds. What did you want me to say; that I sent her a robin, a bat, and a starling?” She said with a snort.

Tim spoke up, “Is anybody going to answer the question Oliver and Roy asked about the kiss?”

“Or the whole, ‘you’re my bitch’ thing?” Thea asked with an amused expression.

“Oh yeah,” Tim said, giving Thea a look of approval. “What she said; that too. When you kissed her was there ass grabbing involved or just tongue?”


“It was those guys who asked, not me,” Tim said innocently.

“Thanks for looking out for us, man,” Roy said sarcastically. "Way to back us up."

“Got your back, bro,” he responded with a grin.

Sara sighed and rolled her eyes, “Felicity and I had lunch the other day and she mentioned that Isabel had hinted that she wouldn’t mind seeing what was under the pencil skirt.”

“I had heard that as well,” Wayne said in a low growl. “Go on.”

“I joked that if Isabel tried anything that I would happily grab her ass and tell her she was my bitch,” she said in a deadpan.

Thea burst out in a snort and Barbara began to snicker. “I love it,” she said, lifting her glasses so she could wipe the tears from under her eyes as she tried to control her laughter then proceeded to do a slow clap.

“So what was all that stuff about you and Felicity hooking up and then breaking up?” Oliver asked with a touch of anger.

“Seriously Ollie?” Sara said, with a smirk.

“Yes, seriously; forgive me if I’m curious as to what the hell all that was about, but I think asking for a little bit of clarity isn’t completely out of line here,” he told her through gritted teeth.

“I’m a bit curious about that as well,” Batman rumbled dangerously.

Thea made her way over to Barbara and nudged her, then whispered, “We should totally do popcorn for this.”

“Hell, I’m thinking of recording this entire conversation just so I can play it back at parties,” the other woman whispered back. “Look them all pissing on the same tree; woo-frickin’-who, our Baby-girl is turning into a helluva hot ticket apparently.”

“Obviously it was because she was trying to tell me that Isabel was listening in,” Sara drawled, “or are you both so stuck up your own asses that you couldn’t figure that out?”

Tim coughed up a noise that sounded suspiciously like ‘kiss’ only to be punched in the arm hard by Luke. “Ooooow…” he breathed.
“As for the kiss,” Sara said, shooting the two men across the room a look, “it was her way of letting me know that Isabel obviously had surveillance footage of us when she dropped me off at the airport which means that Luke needs to remain here in Starling for at least another couple of days to avoid suspicion.”

“No way!” Luke stated emphatically. “I’m going back with you to get Felicity out of this mess!”

“She’s right,” Wayne broke in reluctantly. “Batwing, you need to stay put for at least a day or two; especially if the Rochev woman is monitoring your comings and goings.”

“Hey, wait, so you did kiss her?” Roy said curiously.

“Yeah,” Sara shrugged. “What of it?”

"Dude," Tim whispered, giving the other man a subtle fist bump.

“Nice,” the younger man said bobbing his head in appreciation.

"I can't believe I ever had sex with you," Thea muttered looking over at Roy with disgust.

“Felicity kissed you?” Bruce asked slowly, his mouth set in a grim line.

“Relax, your fiancée didn’t kiss me, I kissed her and it was perfectly innocent, I swear,” Sara chuckled.

“It must have been one hell of a kiss if Isabel was convinced the two of you were together,” Oliver bit out.

“It was a simple little goodbye kiss, Ollie,” Sara smirked. “Don’t you and Dig ever get the urge to pucker up and say ‘let’s be friends’?”

“I can answer that with a definite, ‘hell no’,” Diggle said with a snort.

“So, on the mouth?” Tim piped up after quickly stepping out of Luke’s reach.

“Okay, you guys are all idiots,” Thea pronounced giving them all the stink-eye. “I say we dump all of you and form our own group because there is way too much dumbass for one basement going on right now.”

“Right on!” Barbara agreed slapping her a high five. “You know what, kiddo? I’m really starting to like you.”

“Thanks!” Thea said with a beaming grin.

“If we can cut the banter short, and get to the plan already?” Batman said crossly. Everyone quieted down and his eyes swept the room, “Obviously Canary is going to be on this ‘assignment’ for a few days leaving Felicity on her own and out in the cold. That means we need to figure out a way to get someone else on the inside as quickly as possible. Canary, who can you trust inside the organization?”

“Wrong! You’re not using Felicity to fix your fuck ups, Wayne!” Oliver said furiously, “If this group has infiltrated your city then you deal with it; meanwhile, this is what’s going to happen: You and Nightwing will do like you planned and set up surveillance around the facility and then when she leaves, you pick her up, take her to the airport, and send her back here or else I’m coming down there to get her myself!”
“That’s not going to happen,” Wayne said in a dangerously low voice. Despite being dressed in a suit and tie he was very much the Batman at that moment.

“Wanna bet?” He snapped back.

“Felicity stays in Gotham!” Batman said with a look of rage.

“Felicity is coming back home where we can protect her!” Oliver told him. “I trusted you to keep her safe and I told you what I would do if you failed. Since you aren’t willing to man-up and accept that, then I’m coming to Gotham to get her personally! Dig, call the pilot and tell him we’re on our way.”

“If you’re heading to Gotham then I’m going with you,” Luke told him, equally irate. He looked from one man to the other, “There is no way in hell I’m sitting in this goddamn basement for two days while my sister is going through God knows what in there!”

“Shit, I’m going with Luke and Oliver then,” Tim said stubbornly crossing his arms over his chest.

“You are not coming to Gotham, Queen!” Batman said in an almost inhuman growl. "Stay in your own city; this is my concern, not yours!”

“Hey!” Diggle shouted. “All of you need to shut the fuck up and put your dicks back in your pants because this pissing contest is officially over!” He waited until everyone went quiet, looking between Oliver and Wayne before turning to Sara, “You’re going to Gotham; the rest of us,” he swept his eyes across the room and put on his best drill sergeant’s voice, “will stay put until we’re needed.”

“Goddamn it, Dig--!” Oliver started angrily.

“Diggle’s right, Ollie!” Thea said angrily from beside Barbara.

“Stay out of this, Thea,” he warned her.

“No, Ollie; I won’t, because what you seem to be forgetting is that Felicity doesn’t need anyone to come rescue her!” Thea spat out.

“Yes, she does!” He said darkly.

“No, she doesn’t!” She stepped forward, going toe to toe with him. “Felicity isn’t some damsel in distress, Ollie! She’s a genius, she can fight—she took Slade out twice! Hell, the last time she faced Slade she took him and a bunch of his super-soldiers out all by herself, remember?!”

You could hear a pin drop the room went so quiet. Each member of Team Arrow flinched visibly at the mention of the name while Luke and Bruce both looked on in shock. Tim fell back beside Barbara, his expression a mixture of shock, surprise, and finally settling into realization.

“Felicity killed Deathstroke?” Tim asked faintly.

“Shit,” Barbara breathed from her place near the console.

“What? What are you talking about; Felicity would never…” Luke asked in confusion, his words trailing off into silence as he looked towards his friend for answers but Tim’s attention was locked on Oliver who stood frozen in place.

“When the hell was this?” Bruce bit out.

Thea turned to the monitor, her expression grave but determined, “The first time she took him down was during the Blood Army thing right after he killed our mom.”
“Slade Wilson was Deathstroke,” it wasn’t a question. Batman’s nostrils flared, “When was the second time? Six months ago? Is that what happened; she had to kill Deathstroke?”

No one answered; no one had to.

Their expressions said it all.

“Stay out of Gotham, Queen; and stay the hell away from Felicity or else,” he spat out right before the monitor went dark.

“Call the pilot, Dig,” Oliver said grimly.

“Oliver…” Diggle began.

“Fine, I’ll call him myself,” he said irritably as he reached for his phone.

Sara stepped forward, “Ollie, stop for a minute and think things through; how are you going to explain your presence in Gotham to Isabel?”

“I’m not,” he told her. “I’m just going to break her fucking neck then toss her body out of the closest window.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good plan,” Tim said sarcastically, finally coming out of his stupor. “Oliver Queen flies to Gotham without any explanation and his business partner, the same one who attempted a hostile takeover two years ago and with whom he has a very publicly contentious relationship with, turns up dead? No motive there.”

Oliver’s head whipped around and he shot the other man a quelling look but Sara stepped between them, her jaw set. “He’s right, Ollie, and you know it.”

“I don’t care; I’m going,” he told her.

“The Children’s Charity Gala is Saturday,” Luke said stepping forward. “You’re in the middle of a business deal with the head of the Foundation; seems to me that it makes sense that you’d want to be there for something like that.”


“It’s my sister,” he told him stubbornly.

“Bruce said--”

“I don’t give a shit about Bruce,” Luke said angrily. “This is about Felicity!”

“He loves her,” Tim said quietly. “And she loves him; he wouldn’t let anything happen to her.”

“If you believe that then obviously you haven’t been paying attention,” Luke said flatly. He turned to Oliver, “I don’t know how I feel about any of this; I don’t know if I should trust you or kick your ass, but I’m not taking any chances with Felicity’s safety and I know Bruce. If he thinks he can use this situation to get inside of this group then he won’t hesitate to drop Baby in the shit and that is not happening! As long as you’re with me on that then we aren’t going to have a problem, we clear?”

“Crystal,” Oliver said with grim purpose. “And as soon as Felicity is in the clear I’m going to settle up with Wayne.”

“Ollie, don’t you think you’re overreacting?” Sara broke in with a scowl.
“No, I don’t,” he told her flatly.

“Makes two of us,” Luke told him. “We’ll take the Wayne Gulfstream. I’ll call my dad and fill him in on what’s really going on and then let him figure out a reason for you to stick around until the Gala.”

Sara blinked in surprise, “Wait; your dad knows about all this?”

He glanced at her, “Who do you think designed my suit?”

“Your dad? Sweet old guy who lets a little old lady boss him around and can’t even get a cracker for his soup; that guy?” Sara asked.

“To be fair, she bosses all of us around, not just dad, but yeah,” Luke nodded.

“So…who in your family isn’t a vigilante?” She asked incredulously.

“Peggy Ann,” Luke, Barbara, and Tim said at the same time.

“But she totally could be,” Tim muttered. “That old lady scares the bejesus out of me and I’m pretty sure she could take Bruce in a fight.”

“Does Felicity know?” Diggle asked in disbelief.

“She knows,” Luke said wryly as Tim snorted.

“How do you think Bruce recruited her to begin with?” Tim said drolly. “He had to get her old man’s permission before he even mentioned the words ‘special project’ to her, although there is no way he knows about any of the rest of this. As far as Lucius knows, Baby is just tech support.”

“And I know for a fact that he doesn’t know about this other thing Bruce has going on between them,” Luke said coldly. “When he finds out that Bruce is involved with one of his daughters, you won’t have to worry about laying a hand on him.”

Tim shook his head, “Yeah, that’s going to go down like a ton of bricks. If you think Bruce can get scary you should see Lucius when it comes to his daughters. This is going to be one hell of shitstorm; we’re talking epic meltdown.”


“So her entire family, with the exception of the grandmother… Damn, that girl; I swear…” Diggle said in wonder. He took a deep breath and turned to Oliver, “Fine. Let’s go.”

“We should all go,” Thea suggested.

“Yeah, I could use a trip to Gotham,” Roy agreed.

“I need you to stay here,” Oliver told him.

“Oliver…” Dig began.

“Someone might need to be the Arrow,” he said, cutting him off. “I’ll take my gear and you can use the extra suit Felicity had made for you last year, just in case. Plus I need you here to help Barbara and Tim and supervise Roy and Thea’s training.”

“I’m not staying,” Tim objected.
“Yes, you are,” Barbara told him firmly. “With Queen flying the coop it’s more important than ever that you maintain a presence at Queen Consolidated.”

“Good point,” Thea’s brow furrowed in confusion. “If he’s going to Gotham, and Isabel is doing her Dr. Evil impression down there, who’s running QC?”

“You are,” Oliver told her. When she started to object he cut her off, “Hopefully we’ll be back by tomorrow, but if Felicity digs in her heels we might have to be there a while. With any luck she’ll see reason but we might actually have to go to this Gala. You can go in and pretend to show Tim around, take a few meetings, so if Isabel makes any moves while we’re gone you can let us know. If anything goes wrong and you can’t get in touch with us, Walter will talk you through it.” He looked at the rebellious expressions on all of their faces, “Just in case I’ll buy us some tickets to the Wayne Foundation Fundraiser, okay? Since you’ve been helping run mom’s Glades Foundation for the last couple of years we can use that to explain your presence at the Gala by saying that you’re there to network and we can call Roy your plus one…”


“Thea,” Oliver said warningly, “this isn’t a game. You need to put this bad blood between the two of you aside and start working together. If I let you come along then you will follow my lead and Roy’s, understood?”

“Got it,” she said with a hint of a pout as Roy tossed her a slightly smug look.

“Are we going to have a problem getting invites at the last minute?” He asked Luke.

He shook his head, “It’s a pretty hot ticket but my mom runs the Foundation. Between nepotism and my own none too shabby hacking skills, I can make sure you all get in. My dad will send the jet back on Friday for the rest of you. He can also arrange for some corporate apartments while you’re down there so you don’t have to worry about finding a hotel.”

“That’s not necessary,” Oliver told him. “I’m sure we can figure something out.”

“You don’t seem to get how big of an event we’re talking about,” Barbara spoke up. “Everyone who’s anyone goes to this thing and between the party-goers, the businessmen and their entourages, the press, and the tourists, all the hotels tend to get booked up months in advance on that weekend. You could stay at my place but I’ve got one bed, a fold out couch, and a whole lot of floor; that’s about it.”

“You could stay at the manor but I doubt Bruce will be feeling hospitable,” Tim said blowing out his cheeks and rocking back on his heels.

“Take the apartments; I insist and, knowing Dad, so will he,” Luke said. “Besides, if your cover story is that this is a business trip then it’ll be expected.”

“Fine,” Oliver agreed albeit with some obvious reluctance.

“You guys are making a mistake, you know that right?” Tim broke in. “If you show up in Gotham like this, Bruce is going to lose his shit and Felicity isn’t going to appreciate it at all.”

“Tim, are you going to support us, or what?” Luke asked him flatly. “Because this isn’t about Bruce and his need to dominate everyone and everything; it’s about my sister. I get that he’s your dad so if you don’t want to take a side, then fine, but we’re doing this. Lead, follow, or get the hell out of my
way because, as much as I love you, bro, Felicity comes first.”

“Ah damn it,” Tim scowled. “Fine. I’m in.”

“Me, too,” Barbara said from the workstation.

“Barb, you don’t have to be a part of this,” Luke told her.

“Oh shut the hell up,” Barbara said with a snort. “If the shit hits the fan then you’ll need a tech not to mention a referee. I’m in.”

“Thanks,” Oliver said turning to the woman in the wheelchair with a grateful nod.

“That’s my girl in there,” Barbara told him. “She was my first Padawan after I became Oracle, we rebuilt Watchtower together, I trained her, and I’ve known her a hell of a lot longer than any of you with the exception of Luke. I’ve definitely known Bruce and all of his moods longer than anyone else with the exception of Dick and Alfred. I’m not saying I agree that you should go in guns blazing, but if shit gets real you’re all going to have to pull together; all of you, including Bruce,” she told them. “That means we’re a team; all of us. If we have any chance in hell of getting to the bottom of this crap then we have to remain a cohesive unit.” She looked at Oliver squarely, “I’ll stay here with the team until we can all come down. Until then, if you need tech support just call me. I can tap into Watchtower using Baby’s LAIR setup and it’ll be just like I was right there with you guys. Keep us in the loop until then, okay?”

He nodded, “Thanks.”

“I’ll take you home to pack a bag and we can call the pilot on the way,” Dig told him.

“I’ll call your office and do my first and, thus far, only act as your EA and cancel all of your meetings for the rest of the week,” Barbara told him. “Anything that can’t be shuffled I’ll help Thea muddle through.”

“Thanks,” Thea said gratefully. “I mean, I’ve run the club on my own for a while now but I don’t know anything about running QC.”

“Don’t sweat it; your brother has been doing it for a while so it can’t be that hard,” Barbara told her.

“I appreciate that, really,” Oliver said with a grimace.

“Let’s face it, Queen; you may be pretty but we both know that Felicity was the brains of this outfit,” she told him.

“You’re right about that,” Diggle snorted.

“I got you, Chickie,” Barb said to Thea. “We’re going to rock the crap out of this CEO thing.”

“Let’s hear it for Girl Power,” Thea said, giving her a fist bump then blowing it up.


“Yeah, in a minute.” Luke stepped up to Sara and placed one hand on her waist, “Take care of Baby for me until we get there, okay? And take care of yourself, too.”

Sara reached up and gave him a soft kiss, “I will, don’t worry. I may not know what the hell it is that’s going on exactly, but I can tell you right now; one way or another, that Isabel bitch is going down.”
Chapter Thirty-Nine

As Isabel briefed the rest of the team via video conference, Felicity felt her mind wander to her conversation with Sara. Not only did Bruce know but, from everyone else did as well. It wouldn’t surprise her at all if Oliver and the rest of them were already on their way to Gotham.

This wasn’t going to be fun, she thought miserably. She knew it was just a matter of time before her house of cards fell in a spectacular fashion, but she was hoping to minimize the fallout. Plus, since Luke was down there he’d definitely spill the beans to their dad and now Dick…

Oy vey.

“Felicity, do you have anything you’d like to add?” Isabel asked, turning to her.

For a moment her mind blanked but she managed a calm smile and said, “I think you’ve covered everything.”

“I just finished dropping off the latest group from the island so I can be there in four hours or so,” Lyla said from one of the monitors in front of them. “By the way, it’s good to see you again, Slick,” she smiled at Felicity, still strikingly beautiful despite the black patch covering her left eye. “Nice to see a familiar face.”

“It’s good to see you, too,” Felicity said with genuine feeling. “It’ll be nice to work together again.”

“Yeah,” Lyla said, her eye catching hers meaningfully. “Maybe if we have time we can grab a cup of coffee and catch up before we have to ship out again.”

“Sure,” Felicity said, sensing that Lyla wanted to catch up on more than what they’d been doing on Team Arrow since she left them.

“I can be there in thirty,” Gypsy said with a nod, her inky black hair held back with a colorful bandana. “I just got out of auditing my last class and I’m on my way now.”

Felicity examined the girl carefully. Other than the scarf on her head, she didn’t look much like her handle. In her dark colored band tee-shirt, black leather jacket, and backpack slung over one shoulder she looked like a normal college student headed for class.

“Excellent,” Isabel said. “Any questions?”

“I have a question.” A voice Felicity knew all too well came from the direction of the training area.
“What makes you think any of us are going to follow some computer geek who doesn’t know squat about fieldwork?”

“Helena; nice to see you again, too,” Felicity said dryly, turning to face her.

“Wish I could say the same,” the woman sneered as she leaned against the doorframe dressed in work out gear instead of her leathers, but still every inch the woman she had grown to...not despise exactly, more like dislike to the point that she really wouldn’t mind seeing her dropped on her head a few dozen times.

Hard.

And with a great deal of enthusiasm.

“Now is not the time to air your personal grievances, Huntress,” Isabel said sharply.

“Oh yeah? So when is a good time because, frankly lady, I don’t know jack-shit about you either other than the fact that you’re just another Ollie Queen rich bitch reject,” Helena said sneeringly. “I only agreed to join this outfit because that Miranda chick promised to bankroll my mission and provide me with back up. If this is the best you’ve got to offer then, so far, color me unimpressed.”

“There’s the door, Huntress,” Katana said, coming to stand beside Felicity. “If we don’t meet with your approval then I believe you can show yourself out.”

Helena smiled mockingly, “I’ve got no beef with you Katana, it’s the simpering little blonde I have a problem with.”

Felicity winced as the slick buzzing sound filled her ears again. The faint sounds of a man’s voice speaking in Japanese sounded just outside of her hearing range. She could just make out the words if she concentrated hard enough but she still didn’t know what they meant.

***//危険なゲームがここにプレイされている。慎重に踏む.//

Felicity glanced over to where the voice was coming from but the only person there was Tatsu. Her eyes skimmed her belt for a walkie talkie but the only thing she had was her sword still strapped to her back. She directed her attention towards Helena and the now nervous expressions of the techs occupying chairs within the Cyber-Ops control room.

No one else seemed to be reacting to the voice but her.

“I have got to cut down on the caffeine,” she muttered to herself.

“I’m signing off,” Isabel said to the other two team members, her expression betraying a hint of the irritation she was feeling towards the contentious woman in the doorway. “Check in as soon as you get here.” She logged off and turned to Huntress, “Perhaps we should take this somewhere more private.”

“No need,” Helena said. She eyed Felicity with barely concealed hostility. “Felicity and I are old friends; isn’t that right, Blondie?”

Unable to stop herself, Felicity smirked as she noted the still faint bruising on the other woman’s shoulder and throat. Unlike herself, Helena didn’t have access to Oliver’s magic herbs and Bruce hadn’t been nearly as considerate or gentle in his treatment of the other woman as he’d been with her, “Practically BFF’s. By the way, I heard you experienced some technical difficulties with a piece of acquired tech recently; how’s the shoulder, Helena?”
Helena’s eyes turned cold as ice, “Why not take this into the training ring out there and find out for yourself?”

“That’s enough,” Katana said sharply.

“Walk away Huntress,” Isabel said coldly, “before I rethink the contract we extended towards you in good faith.”

“But I thought I was a valued member of the team?” Helena said with false gaiety as she fluttered her eyelashes mockingly.

“What you are is a psychopath,” Tatsu bit out, her dark eyes growing cold as she pinned the other woman with her gaze, her muscles tensed for a fight.

“But not,” Helena said lazily as she pushed away from the doorframe. “So much for spreading that team spirit, huh? What’s the matter,” she said insolently, “can’t little Miss Team Arrow hold her own or do you need the crazy samurai lady who talks to her sword and Miranda’s guard bitch to fight your battles for you?”

“Jealous, Helena?” Tatsu asked, her voice dropping to an icy registry as she placed her hand on the hilt of her katana blade. “Perhaps you’d like a chance to speak to Soultaker yourself?”

The buzzing sound grew louder then, and with it the words the man was speaking switched from Japanese to lightly accented English.

//The angry one burns with hatred and rage but her soul is not yet lost, my wife. Allow the bright lady to engage her as she will. This is her fight, not ours; not yet. Fate must play its part before we intercede.//

Even though the person speaking wasn’t making a whole lot of sense (Bright lady? My wife?) he had a point; this was her fight and if she allowed anyone to intercede on her behalf it would weaken her position a hell of a lot worse than Helena giving her a beat down would.

“That won’t be necessary,” Felicity said, quickly making a decision and stepping forward. If she was going to stick this out long enough to get to the bottom of things then she’d have to prove herself, not just to Isabel, but to everyone else in the organization as well. Apparently that meant she’d have to play this by prison rules, meaning she needed to start her tenure off by taking out the biggest bitch in the yard or, barring that, at least try.

And, as everyone knew, Helena definitely qualified as a bitch.

She offered the other women an easy half-smile, “I’d be happy to spar with you, Helena. After all, we have a few hours until the others get here,” She turned to Isabel. “I assume that there are some workout clothes I can change into? Perhaps a locker-room?”

“Of course,” Isabel said, her expression as cool and composed as ever but Felicity could detect a note of surprise in the icy cold depths of her eyes. “Ms. Yamashiro; could you show Ms. Smoak to the locker-rooms please and provide her with a change of clothing?”

“Of course. Please follow me,” Tatsu said, leading the way.

As Felicity passed Helena the other woman hissed, “Payback’s a bitch, four-eyes.”

She merely smiled calmly and met the other woman’s angry stare, “Here’s hoping.”
A short time later, Felicity was standing barefoot in the ring wearing the extra set of contacts she always kept in her bag, and dressed in a sports bra and biker shorts she borrowed from Tatsu as she squared off against Helena Bertinelli.

Not the first day she was expecting for damn sure.

Tatsu had taken the time to introduce her to the Orbital trainer, a man named Ted Grant that Felicity immediately recognized from Bruce’s files as a Bat family team friendly. She took a moment to examine the man through a fall of dark eyelashes as he wrapped her hands first with cotton gauze, taking the time to stabilize her wrist to just shy of her knuckles which he covered with a thicker pad, before securing it with tape making sure to keep the palms of her hands clear so she could still make a fist easily. When he was done he eased the gel sparring gloves over her hands carefully.

Ted appeared to be just a decade or so older than Bruce; in his late forties or early fifties, although she knew for a fact he was much older than that. According to Bruce’s files, Ted Grant fought as a professional boxer and was, at one point, the heavyweight champion of the world who later transformed himself into a vigilante who operated under the handle ‘Wildcat’. She also knew that, although he wasn’t technically a meta, he did have some meta-human abilities he’d somehow acquired before retiring from the ring giving him ‘nine lives’, decelerated aging, and enhanced night vision. All of his physical prowess however, was acquired through training and effort which is why Bruce had turned to him as a boxing coach and mentor early in his career.

She took in his appearance carefully. His dark brown, nearly black hair was white at the temples and his face was heavily lined although it wasn’t as due to aging as it was from having led a hard life both inside the ring and out of it. His deep blue eyes met hers and he smirked flirtatiously, letting her know he’d noticed her furtive examination and giving her a wink in response.

She still had the good grace to blush at that, causing his grin to widen slightly. Even though the older man was nearly eighty he apparently didn’t let that slow him down for a second. In fact, she could readily admit that if she wasn’t already over her quota when it came to romantic entanglements with masks, she might even find him attractive. He was certainly handsome enough despite his rugged good looks and a nose that had obviously been broken on more than one occasion.

She found herself drawing comparisons between the man in front of her and the other older and ruggedly handsome man currently sharing her bed. The first thing she noted was that he was a bit shorter than Bruce, although still taller than her by a few inches, standing at a mere 5’8” tall. That said, what he lacked in stature he made up for in width and none of it was due to fat. Bruce was no slouch, but this man’s build rivaled his easily. Under his simple white tee, his heavily muscled chest flexed and rippled as he taped her hands and, if she had to guess, she’d put him somewhere between 190 to 200 pounds of pure muscle.

It was strange, she thought. It was almost as though Orbital was trying to draw the Bat and Arrow teams together under one roof by recruiting their assets and friendlies. First Sara, now Lyla, Ted Grant, Helena…

Even if vigilantes weren’t exactly in the mainstream, Bruce and Oliver weren’t the only active masks out and about by a long shot. It was either the world’s biggest coincidence or deliberate design that so many people she and Bruce knew happened to have found employment with the Orbital Organization and Felicity suspected it was the latter.

Curiouser and curiouser, she thought as he finished wrapping her knuckles. What was the point? And the look on Lyla’s face during the video chat; something was definitely going on.

“What Helena is a dirty fighter so watch yourself in there,” he told her quietly in a rough twang that was
more Windy City Metropolis than Gotham East End, something he had in common with Lance. “I’ll step in if things get out of hand but fair warning; chances are, she’s not gonna play by the rules.”

“Yeah, we’ve met,” Felicity said wryly, dismissing her concerns for the moment so she could concentrate on the matter at hand. “You ran a gym down in the East End a while back, didn’t you; Wildcat’s Gym in Old Town?”

“Yeah,” Ted said, eyeing her curiously. “Don’t recall seeing you there though, sweetheart.”

She smiled crookedly at the slightly patronizing endearment as it succeeded in further reminding her of the avuncular Detective who had become a dear and trusted friend. Oddly enough that, more than what she knew of him from Bruce’s files, is what put her at ease, “Can’t say I’ve had the pleasure although we do have a mutual friend.”

“Oh yeah?” Grant asked, eyeing her curiously, “Like who?”

“Matches Malone,” she said, using the undercover alias Bruce used the first time he met Grant early in his career as the Bat.

The older man narrowed his eyes slightly, “You don’t exactly strike me as the type who hangs around gangsters and hoods, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“You’d be surprised,” she said, easily falling into the same pattern of speech she habitually used with Lance and grinning at the inadvertent ‘hood’ reference. “Besides, our mutual friend wasn’t actually either of those things, was he?”

“And what would be the nature of your relationship to ‘our mutual friend’?” Grant asked, his voice dropping to a more confidential level as he caught onto her deliberate turn of phrase.

Taking a chance at securing a potential ally, she said, “According to him, I’m his fiancée, but ask me later and I might have a different answer for you,” she murmured back.

Yeah, she thought, maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world if Helena wound up putting her in traction for a few weeks. At least then she might score some sympathy points.

Ted’s expression froze and his startled eyes met hers, “Are you sure you should be here, darlin’?” He asked her in a near whisper. “I get the feeling that these ain’t exactly the kind of people a man like B-,” he grimaced, “our mutual friend’ would appreciate having his girl keep time with.”

“Probably not,” she told him honestly. “And before you ask; yes, he knows I’m here and, yes, I imagine he is very, very pissed at me right now.” In fact, the snipers on the rooftop were probably the only thing keeping her safe from the wrath of the Bat, she thought ruefully. “He’s probably on a rooftop somewhere close just waiting to pounce the minute I leave. He kind of, um, told me not to come and I sort of didn’t listen…”

“Shit,” Ted breathed, shaking his head slightly. “Goddamn it; why is it every time I cross paths with a pretty blue-eyed blonde, trouble follows? I swear, the only thing worse than a blonde is a redhead and that’s just because you never know if they’re gonna kiss ya or kill ya.”

“I’m not sure but if it’s of any comfort, our mutual friend asks me the same thing all the time,” she told him wryly.

“Are you two going to spend all day chit-chatting or are we going to do this?” Helena called out, rolling her shoulders angrily.
“Hold your goddamn horses, Bertinelli, and stay in your corner where you belong; long as your narrow ass in in my ring you’re on my time!” The older man threw her an irritated look before bringing his head close to Felicity’s, “I can try, but I probably won’t be able to get you out of this without things getting messy; you sure you can handle her or do we need to start talking exit strategies? ‘Our mutual friend’ won’t take too kindly to it if I bring you back to him in less than pristine condition, y’know?”

Felicity nodded slightly, “It’s fine; I’m good,” she told him then paused. “On the off-chance I’m wrong though, I’d appreciate it if you could make a phone call to let him know where they dumped my body,” she said, only half joking. “Or whatever’s left of it, anyway.”

Ted didn’t look amused though and he gave her one last look of concern before stepping back and facing Helena, “Okay, now this is only supposed to be a sparring match so that means you do nothing that can potentially incapacitate your opponent permanently and no killing blows, understood? I see you going in for the kill, Huntress, and me and you are gonna have a problem.”

“I’ll do my best, old man, but I can’t make any promises,” she said with a wicked smile.

“I’ve kicked tougher ass than yours, little girl,” he told her, his eyes narrowing dangerously and, for a second, Felicity could see the feline ferocity of his namesake come out in the man’s stance and attitude. “I’ve taken on everybody from Nazis to Mobsters—the real deal, not these slick business types you like to hunt who couldn’t fight their way out of a wet paper sack, so don’t think I won’t put a goddamn knot on your head in a heartbeat; we clear?”

“Crystal,” she said, still smirking nastily.

Grant offered her one last look telegraphing his disquiet before stepping out of the ring and leaving Felicity to face the less than stable woman who had threatened to kill her on more than one occasion alone.

Fun times.

Bruce adjusted the high powered binoculars as he sat in the shadow of the smokestack and counted no less than twelve sniper posts on the rooftop of Axis Chemical Processing. Besides the physical manpower there were all kinds of less obvious security measures set up throughout the perimeter. There were no openings, no vulnerabilities he could readily exploit; all he could do is sit there, binoculars in hand, and wait for her to exit the building on her own. Felicity was right; it was definitely a professional operation.

Actually, she didn’t call it ‘professional’, he corrected himself mentally, she called it ‘impressive’.

She was wrong.

He wasn’t impressed by it; ‘impressed’ denoted some measure of admiration on his part. No, he was most definitely not impressed by this cancer that had grown unchecked right under his nose.

He was frustrated, angry, enraged by it; he was not impressed.

//Good thing not all bad guys are this thorough, huh?// Dick said over the coms as though he was reading his mind.

After working together for this many years he probably could.
“How did I not notice this sooner?” Bruce muttered mostly to himself.

“It’s not exactly obvious.” Dick said quietly. “If you weren’t already looking for it, it would just look like any other riverfront East End factory running three shifts on a skeleton crew.”

But he should have known. This wasn’t just any factory after all; this was, as Barbara said, the black hole of everything fucked up in the universe. This place would always be synonymous with the Joker and, with that, everything that was corrupt within Gotham itself. What’s worse is that Felicity knew that and she put herself in this situation anyway.

“I should have bought this place just so I could raze it to the ground and sow it with salt,” he growled. “Any movement yet?”

“Nothing other than security checking the perimeter at regular intervals. Even so, they’ve got things pretty well sewn up. I’m not seeing a whole lot of potential weaknesses from this vantage point; you?”

“No,” he said in a rough timbre. Bruce adjusted the knit cap on his head and raised the collar on his dark peacoat to keep out the chill. Since they needed to operate in broad daylight instead of under the cover of darkness, he and Dick had set up surveillance on opposite rooftops, taking advantage of the many abandoned canning factories close to Axis. In case he was spotted he made sure to dress in the rough work clothes of an ordinary dock worker in order to blend in. Hiding in plain sight was a skill he’d honed out of necessity. It helped that very few people expected Billionaire Bruce Wayne to be hanging around the East End docks in the middle of the day but he wasn’t taking any chances.

“I did get a look at a couple of the snipers when they changed shifts though.”

“What did you see?”

“Not much; no one we know anyway.” He said quietly. “As an interesting side note, they all appear to be female, not that it matters. Some of the best shooters we’ve come up against are women, but these are all ghosts. I got a picture and uploaded it to Barbara but she came up blank. Not even ARGUS has files on them.”

He could hear the question in his voice, “Felicity has a permanent backdoor to ARGUS set up on her LAIR console apparently.”

“Good to know. How did Baby get mixed up in all of this to begin with?” Dick asked quietly. Bruce adjusted his binoculars and spotted the slightest movement on one of the other rooftops cattycorner to his location and Axis.

“Watch it; you’re casting shadows,” Bruce warned.

The shadow on the rooftop seemed to ease back before Dick began to speak once more. “Alfred said Baby was working with the Arrow in Starling and now you have Barbara and Tim down there; when the hell did that happen?”

“Felicity joined his mission not long after she left Gotham apparently. As for the rest of it, Ra’s has a connection to Starling and I want to see where it leads so Queen and I agreed to temporarily combine forces.”

“But you don’t trust him.” Dick said drolly.

“I don’t trust anyone,” Bruce said bluntly.
“Are you sure sending Oracle and Red Robin down there was the right move?"

“As long as they’re there, I can keep eyes on Queen while we figure out the Ra’s angle. They can take care of themselves; it’s Felicity I’m worried about.”

“Was she in on that Blood Army thing a while back?” He asked. When Bruce didn’t answer he let loose with a muffled curse, “I knew we should have kept going; something about her voice didn’t sound right.”

“What do you mean?” Bruce asked quietly.

“I called her after we landed in Gotham even though Tim said Tam told him she was fine. She didn’t sound right, like she was shaken up; off, you know? At the time I chalked it up to shock but now… All she had to do was say something and I would have come and gotten her. Why did she keep all of this a secret? I don’t get it. Now I have to wonder what else has been going on that we don’t know about.”

“A lot apparently.”

“For example?"

Bruce clenched his jaw, “I don’t have a lot of the details but, among other things, Felicity had a couple of run-ins with our old friend Deathstroke while she was in Starling.”

“Are you serious? Deathstroke?” Dick spat out. “Is he a part of this?”

“No, she didn’t; believe me she and I will be discussing that later,” Bruce said in a low timbre. “I also found out that our friend with the swords went by the civilian identity ‘Slade Wilson’, and that he’s the same man who killed Queen’s mother and who was partly responsible for the Blood Army debacle to begin with.”

“Good to have a name at least. Dick asked grimly. “Is he a part of this?"

“No,” Bruce said flatly. “According to Queen he’s dead.”

“Dead? How the hell did that happen? Did the Arrow take him out?"

“No.”

“Who then?”

Bruce felt a muscle tick in his temple, “Felicity.”

“Says who?” Dick asked incredulously although his voice never got above a whisper.

“Pretty much her entire team but, before you ask, no, I don’t have any details yet.”

“Wait, the whole team took him out with Felicity acting as their tech or--?"

“According to Queen’s sister it was just Felicity. She took him down alone. Twice,” he added gruffly. “Once right after the Blood Army was defeated and again six months ago.”

There was a long pause before Dick spoke again. “Bullshit. You don’t actually believe that she took on this guy twice by herself much less that she was able to kill that psycho, do you?"

“I don’t know,” Bruce said grimly as he continued to keep an eye on the snipers on the roofline.
“There’s no way. Dick said firmly. When you and I went against that bastard we barely made it out in one piece and that was with both of us working together. There is no way a girl who weighs maybe a buck-ten soaking wet could have taken him out all by herself.”

“Like I said, I don’t have any of the answers yet but I’m going to get to the bottom of it once and for all right after we get Felicity out of there and someplace safe,” he said with cold purpose.

“What has she said about it?”

“No,” Bruce said gruffly. “Every time I try to get her to talk about it she shuts down.” His grip tightened around the binoculars, “I should have broken every bone in Queen’s body when I had the chance.”

“How is it that you found out about all of this? Stellmoor, Queen being the Arrow, Baby—I mean, shit; when Alfred filled me in on my way over here I was tempted to ask him if he’d gotten into the sherry again.”

“I found out about Stellmoor and Queen a few weeks ago but I didn’t know Baby was running an op on her own until the other day,” Bruce told him as he kept his eyes on the guards as they swept the perimeter again.

There was another pause, Alfred also said you’ve been spending a lot of time at the penthouse lately…with Felicity. Overnight. He cleared his throat uncomfortably, Bruce, are you sure that’s a good idea? He said you were upgrading the alternate Watchtower but, um, I mean, are you two…?

“We’re together if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Are you—?” He cursed under his breath. You know. I’ve never said anything about what you do in your personal life, but… Damn it, Bruce, you can’t screw around with Baby, you know that, right? Not with her! She’s not like the rest of the women you use and toss away! What the hell were you thinking? Were you thinking? What happens when Lucius—?!”

“It’s not like that,” he said with an edge of anger.

“Then what is it like?” Dick asked coolly. Because we both know that as long as you do what we do this isn’t going to end well. The longest relationship you’ve ever had was with Selina and look how that turned out.

“Felicity isn’t Selina,” Bruce growled.

“Damn right she’s not; Selina could take care of herself, she knew the score with you; Baby doesn’t.” Dick told him, his tone rising slightly as his anger began to get the best of him. She’s an innocent, Bruce. She’s not some woman you can pull a fuck and run with.

“I’m not pulling anything,” he said shortly. “Felicity knows exactly how I feel about her.”

“What? That she’s just another warm body? That as soon as you get bored or things start getting too real you’ll tuck tail and run? You don’t honestly expect her to shrug it off and move on when this goes stale, do you? And what about Luke? What about Lucius? She isn’t just a random fling; this is the entire team, your company, your family; everything! We’ve put up with a lot of shit from you, Bruce, but if you think Tim, or Barbara, or I will ever forgive you if you wind up breaking her—!” He paused, You hurt her and we’re done; do you understand? Done! So when we get her out of there you need to end this quick and clean. If Baby needs to be kept safe, I’ll take her with me and she can help out my team for a while.”
“She stays with me,” Bruce practically growled, his teeth gnashing together.

//That’s a mistake, you know that, right? You told me yourself; it’s either the mission or family, not both. You can’t do both and Baby deserves better!// Dick told him. //Think, Bruce! If things were reversed, if it was me standing where you are, you’d tell me to let her go; that the risks to her safety and to the mission aren’t worth it!//

“I know that!” He shot back. “I know exactly what this means and all the arguments against it! You don’t think I thought this through a million times already?”

//Then why would you even go there?// He said agitatedly. //Tell me that; why? Why take that risk?//

“Because I’m in love with her,” he bit out. “I’m not running away from anything when it comes to her. In fact, if you must know, I asked her to marry me.”

//Seriously?// The other man said in hushed surprise. When he didn’t answer the other man blew out a harsh breath. //What about the mission?//

“I’m done,” Bruce said quietly. “I was going to call you about that before all this went down and ask you if you still wanted the job. I was planning to retire so Baby and I can start a family; from here on out I’m going to take a less active role on the team and focus on training and recruitment instead.”

//Okay, wow; that’s… When the hell did you and Baby even get together?//

“The first time was four years ago.”

//Oh…// Dick seemed to take a moment to consider that. //So this must have started right before she left; right?// Dick seemed to take his silence as an affirmative. //Were you going back and forth to Starling and just not telling anyone? How--?//

“No,” he said quietly. “We had a brief affair and I broke it off which is why she left to begin with. There was no further contact between us until I found out there was a contract on her life a few weeks ago and I went to go get her. I found out about the rest of this and insisted she come home because Queen admitted she wasn’t safe there. We picked up where we left off and things got serious between us fairly quickly.”

//And you just asked her to marry you?//

“Pretty much.”

//When?//

“Sunday.”

//This past Sunday?// Again he took his silence as an affirmative. //That…that seems pretty fast, doesn’t it?//

“Probably,” Bruce said impatiently.

//And, um, did she say yes?//

“She did, but now I’m not sure if she was really saying yes or just trying to distract me so she could sneak off and get herself killed,” he said with the growl of the Bat.

//I doubt that was part of her plan.// Dick said dryly.
“Planned or not, she’s in a secure facility surrounded by armed gunmen and she went in there after I told her not to go,” he said with only a hint of the full measure of anger he was currently feeling.

//Well, yeah; she was always pretty stubborn.//

“And that obstinate nature of hers is going to get her killed if we can’t get her out of there.”

//We’ll get her.//

“We’d better,” Bruce rumbled low in his throat.

//Wow; you and Baby…// Dick said with a soft chuckle. //About damn time.//

“Think so?” Bruce asked with no little amount of sarcasm. “Just a minute ago you were practically accusing me of taking advantage of her.”

//Sorry,// Dick said in a more muted tone. //It's just that when it comes to her…//

“I know,” Bruce said quietly. “To tell you the truth, I probably was taking advantage of her in the beginning. Hell, I probably still am.”

//No. Look, I was just pissed but…Bruce, even back when she first came into the cave I knew it was just a matter of time before you two got together.// Dick told him. //I’ve never seen you react to anyone like that either before or since and I’m happy for you both; really. I’m sorry for accusing you of taking advantage. I should have known better. I’m just…// He sighed, //I just never expected this. Marriage, giving up the mission, kids; that’s…that’s big. And fast. Really, really fast. Are you sure you aren’t, um, rushing into things? I mean, I get that it’s Baby, but still; it feels like you’re moving forward with this at light speed.//

“Probably, but it doesn’t really matter anymore,” he said grimly. “I doubt it’s going to happen at this point anyway.”

//Why? Because she decided to run her own op?// Dick said with a snort. //How many times did Selina go off on her own or pull a heist when you two were screwing around on rooftops and doing your thing?//

“Like I said, Felicity isn’t Selina.”

//So, what? Because she’s Baby and not a thief who moonlights as a vigilante occasionally, you’re going to hold her to a higher standard?//

“Selina may have been a thief but she never lied to me,” he said stubbornly.

//Oh well, that’s a load of utter crap.// Dick said with a snort. //But, giving Selina the benefit of the doubt, what is it she lied to you about exactly? You said she told you about this op a few days ago, right?//

He scowled, “And I told her that she wasn’t to go anywhere near this place.”

//And?//

“And what? She said she was running an op and I told her no!” Bruce said gruffly. “I specifically told her to drop it and she didn’t listen!”

//Okay, so when you said ‘drop it’ did she agree to that?//
Bruce faltered for a moment, “No, but she knew I didn’t want her to put herself in danger like this and she purposefully gave me the impression that she wouldn’t!”

//Alrighty then.//

“Damn it,” he cursed softly. “She purposefully misled me; she said she would be at the penthouse coordinating with the decorators and meeting with a wedding planner later, not holed up in some kind of goddamn fortified compound in the middle of the East End surrounded by snipers!”

//Because Selina never misled you about anything, right?// Dick said sarcastically.

“What do you want me to say?” He asked him. “She lied to me! For all I know she’s—Damn it!” He cursed, putting down the binoculars and leaning against the smokestack as he tried to get his emotions under control.

//You’re just scared, Bruce.//

“You’re goddamn right I’m scared,” he said roughly, running his hand over his mouth. “For all we know she could be bleeding out or worse and I can’t do a fucking thing about it!” He heard Dick chuckle softly through the coms and growled, “What’s so goddamn funny?”

//Nothing, it’s just... You really do love her, don’t you?//

He rubbed the throbbing ache between his eyes and sighed, “Fuck.”

//You deserve happiness, Bruce.// The other man said quietly. //I know we’ve had our differences, and I know you’re pissed at her right now, but I’m glad you finally found someone.//

“Save your congratulations for after we get her clear of that building,” he told him picking up the binoculars again and redirecting his anger toward something more constructive than blind panic.

*\?\?\?/*/\?\?\?/*

As they faced one another on the mat, Felicity had just a few seconds to come up with a strategy for taking the other woman down as quickly as possible. Helena’s eyes met hers and she could see the dangerous glint of barely suppressed anger inside of them. There was no doubt in the other woman’s mind that she was going to win and Felicity intended to use that overconfidence to her advantage.

Helena was strong, experienced, and well-trained in hand to hand combat. Years of working as a ‘vigilante’ (see crazy psycho-bitch mob killer) had given her further confidence in her abilities. Even so, as good as she was, Canary was better and she, along with Diggle, had taught Felicity well. Helena, on the other hand, had no real knowledge of her abilities; as far as she was concerned, she was just another one of Oliver’s ever-present damsels in distress.

Well, she was about to discover the error of her ways, Felicity vowed. She owed the Huntress some payback and she was determined to get her pound of flesh. This wasn’t just a matter of proving herself, this was revenge for all the bullshit she’d had to wade through every time Helena’s angst-filled crazy train rolled into town. A lot of bullshit; from the first time Helena held a crossbow to her throat, tied her up, and left her behind the desk of her old office, to their last meeting where she again held a weapon to her throat, hit her on the back of her head after ripping off her equipment, and gave her a migraine that lasted for days. For all that and more, this bitch was going down.

Helena suddenly stepped forward, her hips squared, and her fist flying towards Felicity’s face. Without even having to think about it, she easily dodged the other woman’s punch, ducking under her straight-armed jab. Following the advice of John Diggle, she didn’t punch at Helena, she
punched through her, coming up with an uppercut to the jaw and a punch to the bridge of her nose.

The uppercut stunned her as the punch to the face caused the other woman to fall back several steps as her eyes began to water and blood burst from her now broken nose. Not giving her time to recover, Felicity dropped and kicked out, sweeping her legs out from under her. Helena dropped but quickly recovered, catching herself and kicking out. Felicity caught a hard kick to the face but rolled with it to lessen the impact. Still, it hurt and she could taste blood on her tongue as she popped back up into a battle stance.

Helena came to her feet, immediately going into a flying kick. Felicity ducked, grabbing the woman’s leg and, using her momentum against her, brought her hard against the mat. Helena rolled with it, bringing her leg up and catching Felicity in the ribs, forcing her backwards and making her chest ache and causing her to gasp for breath as her eyes began to water. She knew she’d definitely be feeling it when the adrenaline wore off but she doubted anything was broken, just bruised. It was a reminder though that the other woman was no pushover. She needed to end this and quickly.

Helena got back up and began to circle her once more, this time more warily as she reassessed Felicity’s skill level as an opponent. Now that the element of surprise was gone, the fight was about to get much more dangerous.

Helena came at her in a flurry of punches, the first catching her hard in the shoulder but the rest of which Felicity successfully blocked although at a cost. Helena was crowding her, forcing her to play defense. Once she got into the corner she’d have nowhere to go and Helena would have the advantage.

She was in a tough situation; Helena was an experienced fighter and her crazy made her strong as well as unpredictable. Time seemed to slow and Felicity could see the flex of her muscles as the other woman brought her elbow up and towards her face. She ducked, but Helena used the palm of her other hand in an upward sweep toward her nose, correctly anticipating her evasive maneuver.

If her palm connected it would undoubtedly shatter her nose; it could even kill her if she didn’t pull her punch in time and Helena wasn’t playing around. She sidestepped the blow, gripping her elbow and casting her off balance. Then, using what she knew about Helena’s encounter on the roof with Bruce, she twisted her injured arm back hard, grabbed the back of her hair, slammed her face against her knee, then swung her around for the takedown while keeping her elbow isolated so she couldn’t move her arm or catch herself.

As the other woman hit the mat with a bounce, taking the impact on the chin, Felicity planted her knee deep her back, Helena’s arm still twisted behind her and locked. She kept a death grip on her hair so that her neck was forced back offering her no easy leverage.

“Fucking…bitch,” Helena panted angrily as she clawed at the mat with her one free hand. She tried kicking up with the back of her heels but Felicity pulled up on her scalp, feeling some of the hairs give at the roots and causing the other woman’s eyes to water.

“I may be a bitch, Helena; but I’m the bitch who’s got you on the ground. Now, do you want a dislocated shoulder or a broken neck, because I’m good with either/or?”

“Bullshit,” she chuckled breathlessly. “You don’t have the balls.”

Felicity tightened the arm-lock until she felt the muscles strain and the cartilage begin to creak. The other woman cried out and she dug her fingers deep into her hair, jerking the woman’s head up further as her knee burrowed into her spine. “Or I can just snap you like a twig; your choice.”
“Go for it,” she spat out.

“Think I won’t?” Felicity asked, allowing her voice to deepen as she allowed some of the darkness that had settled within her to come forth.

Helena gave another breathy chuckle, “You’re not a killer; not like me. You don’t have it in you.”

“A lot’s changed since you saw me last,” Felicity said coldly before bouncing her face hard against the mat and releasing her abruptly.

As soon as she released her, Helena rolled and came to her feet but before she could set her stance, Felicity came up with a roundhouse kick catching her hard in the solar plexus and forcing the air from her lungs as she fell against the mat. It was a solid hit, hard and precise, designed to put her down and keep her there for a while without causing lasting damage even though she knew from experience it felt like you were drowning on dry land until that first painful breath.

Helena gagged; the need to breathe warring with the trauma to the viscera which made her stomach want to turn itself inside out in protest. Diggle had taught her that move with brutal efficiency but Sara had showed her what it felt like firsthand. Felicity maintained her distance but didn’t fidget, she didn’t bounce on the balls of her feet or let down her guard, nor did she look around the room at the expressions of the strangers who had wandered over to see the fight from the sidelines. The first time Sara had taken her down like that, Felicity spent ten minutes puking. The fact that Helena had managed to limit herself to a few dry heaves proved she was still a formidable opponent and she wasn’t about to get cocky. Instead she stood to the side, her gaze locked on Helena and her countenance as still and cold as a statue; all remnants of the girl she’d once been gone. She waited to speak until Helena sucked in that first painful breath; the one that hurt like a bitch due to the deep bruising of the diaphragm.

“Isabel,” she said without looking to even see if the other woman was there, her voice cool and strong as her eyes remained locked on her opponent who was struggling to get to her feet as blood flow to her lungs and chest resumed, “how essential is Huntress to the success of the mission?”

There was a slight pause. “I’d prefer it if she joined the others but she can be replaced. I was planning on bringing in a new asset this afternoon but I’d rather not put an untried recruit in the field; why?”

“I can understand why you’d be reluctant to replace Huntress on this short of notice,” she said conversationally although she remained on high alert, “That said, if necessary, could this new recruit take her place in the mission?”

“Yes,” she said but Felicity could hear the question in her tone.

“Then how important is Huntress to the success of our organization as a whole?” Felicity asked, her voice dropping to a deeper registry. “Will we shut our doors if we lose Ms. Bertinelli as an asset?”

Helena got to her feet shakily and gave Felicity a defiant but slightly confused look.

“Of course not; are you thinking of releasing her from her contract?” Isabel asked.

“I’m considering doing a bit more than that actually,” she said, calling on the same depth of dark purpose Bruce used whenever he became the Bat. She planted her feet and squared her hips and shoulders as she faced her, “You heard the lady, Huntress; you’re not just replaceable, you’re erasable. I can’t have a loose cannon on my team and, make no mistake, this is my show now,” she told her icily. “I’ve been hired as the new Director of this branch of the OO and, if you want to work
here, then you need to come to grips with the fact that you now answer to me. Unfortunately, due to our shared history, I don’t think I can just let you go if you decide that you aren’t willing to accept those terms. You’re too dangerous to just set out on the streets again so the only way you’re getting out of this ring is as a cooperative member of the team or feet first and in a body bag; your move.”

“You think I’m scared of you, Blondie?” Helena chuckled breathlessly, not giving an inch despite the fact that she still had one arm tucked protectively around her middle.

If there was one thing she’d learned from being around vigilantes, it was that sometimes attitude gets better results than a closed fist ever could.

Dropping her chin slightly and allowing the shadows to cast over her features, she simply said, “No, but I think you should be.”

That made her blink.

Helena’s brow furrowed slightly in confusion as she looked at her askance. She huffed as she shifted her stance to the side, protecting her torso and giving Felicity a smaller target. “What? Like *you’re* going to kill me?” She asked incredulously, her eyebrows shooting up towards her hairline. “Little Miss Pencil Skirts and Ponytails is going to take me down? I don’t think so.”

“What’s the organization’s policy on that, Isabel?” Felicity called out, again without shifting her gaze from Helena. “I haven’t gotten around to reading the employee handbook yet.”

“It’s not encouraged,” Isabel said after another brief pause.

“But it’s permissible?” You could hear a pin drop even though Felicity could feel every eye on her as she allowed her bluff to play out. This was a power play; not just to teach Helena who was in control but to establish her leadership position among the others as well. They were playing poker and the stakes were high; life or death. All she could do now is wait to see if Helena would fold or stick it out and hope she could take her on the river flip.

And if she was wrong, if she had to put her money where her mouth was… Well, she’d cross that bridge when she came to it. That said, she’d spent a long time in the company of men who wore their shadows like cloaks; long enough that she now had a darkness of her own and she was letting Helena see that as she finally allowed her own demons to come out to play.

“Technically,” the other woman hesitated for a fraction of a second, “yes.”

She smiled; not a huge smile, just a slight upturn of the corners of her lips, the kind of smile Bruce used in the cowl that made grown men run in the opposite direction. “I’m game if you are, Helena.”

The other woman looked to the right of the ring in the direction of where Felicity presumed Isabel was standing and bounced on her feet uncertainly, “So I can kill her?”

“You can try,” Felicity answered for her. It was a gamble…but it paid off.

Helena relaxed her stance, a newfound respect creeping over her features, “Maybe next time.”

Fold.

Knowing better than to count her chips at the table, she said, “Why wait for a next time when there’s no time like the present?”
“And what’s to stop me from snapping your neck?” Helena asked, her eyes searching out any exploitable weakness and coming up empty.

Sara taught her well and, compared to facing down Slade Wilson with a bomb in her pocket, Helena was a cake walk.

“Nothing,” she answered. “Just remember though, that goes both ways. Consider this your one and only warning, Helena; because if there is a next time, I won’t give you a chance to catch your breath before I finish you.”

“You honestly think you can take me down?” She asked incredulously.

“I already did,” she said simply causing the other woman’s arm to tighten reflexively around her torso.

“Lucky shot,” she muttered.

“Which one?” Felicity asked her. “The one where I pulled my punch before sending bone fragments into your brain, the one where I didn’t snap your neck after popping your shoulder out of the socket, or the one where I could have easily stopped your heart with a blow to the chest?”

“If it’s that easy then why didn’t you?” Helena asked, the smirk still on her face even though Felicity knew she was just posturing at that point.

“Two reasons: First, that Isabel made it clear that calling in a replacement would just be a big pain in the ass, and second, it’s my first day on the job and I’d like to avoid having to kill someone right off the bat.” She shrugged, “Don’t get me wrong; I was planning on it, but then I realized that while tossing your dead and broken body in the river after taking you apart one piece at a time might satisfy a personal grudge or two, it also might negatively impact office morale.”

“Damn Blondie, you’ve gotten dark,” she said with a snort before backing off half a step and adopting a more casual attitude.

“You don’t know the half of it,” she muttered. “We good or are we doing this?” She asked, without bothering to extend a hand. She was willing to drop it but she wouldn’t put it past Helena to go for a cheap shot either.

“We’re good,” Helena said in a slightly more mollified tone.

“Get yourself cleaned up and have your injuries seen to,” She ordered. “I expect you to be five by five by the time the others get here.”

Centering herself, Felicity made the deliberate decision to turn her back and walk out of the ring. She kept her pace slow and steady, making it obvious that she was offering Helena the opportunity to make a move while demonstrating the fact that she was confident enough in her abilities not to see her as a real threat. Grant held open the ropes for her, his eyes locked on Helena for her but from his body language she could tell that the other woman had already backed off.

“Looks like our mutual friend taught you a thing or two, huh?” He asked quietly as he handed her a towel so she could wipe the sweat out of her eyes as he led her to the closest medical station.

“Actually no,” she said in equally hushed tones. “Well, the attitude maybe. As for the rest of it, I was trained by a former League assassin and a member of the Special Forces.”

“Explains the Krav Maga and the trip down the river you offered Helena,” he said, giving her a
second look as he tilted her chin up and dabbed at the blood on her chin with a damp towel. “Speaking of which, she split your lip pretty good and you’ve got a bruise coming up on your cheek, but you’ll live.”

“Good thing I’m not vain,” she said with a grin then winced as it pulled at her lip. Now that the adrenaline was wearing off she could feel every hit Helena had managed to land.

“You’re still gorgeous, sweetheart. Scary as hell when you’re pissed; but gorgeous,” he said with a chuckle as he applied a butterfly bandage to a cut above her eye she didn’t even realize she had. “I’ve seen some tough dames in my time but, damn; you’ve got style, I’ll give you that. I didn’t know whether to be turned on or scared shitless; I can see why our mutual friend decided to snatch you up. Hell, if I was a few years younger, I might consider giving him a run for his money.” He winked at her again as he applied a cold compress to her chin and gestured for her to hold it there, “What do you say, sweetheart? There might be a little snow on the roof but the furnace still burns bright; we could make beautiful babies together.”

“Careful, I might just take you up on that,” she told him. “Remember, I’m kind of into older guys.”

He chuckled, “You’re a class act, honey. I’m glad you didn’t get yourself killed in there. It would have put a real damper on the rest of my day.”

“Yeah, well; being dead wouldn’t have done wonders for my mood either.”

“That was quite an unexpected display you put on,” Isabel said as she approached them.

She turned her attention to Isabel but noted how Grant seemed to stiffen slightly as he disengaged in order to give them privacy. She waited until he was far enough away before speaking, “If anyone should be familiar with my fighting skills, it’s you.”

“Indeed.” Again her eyes lit up with interest as she looked her over. She brought her hand up to cup her chin lightly and Felicity had to force herself to remain relaxed and not flinch away from the other woman’s touch, “How are you feeling?” She asked, her lips parted slightly as she ran a manicured finger under the cut on her lip.

Well, apparently that revved someone’s engines. No wonder she asked her out to lunch after she decked her in Oliver’s office; she apparently thought it was foreplay. Okay, so…yeah. Not going to get used to being on this end of Isabel’s whole ‘scary sexy’ vibe any time soon, Felicity thought.

“Nothing an ice pack and a decent bottle of red wine won’t cure,” she said lightly as she dropped the compress to the side as she gave the other woman her full attention.

“I’ll have to keep that in mind,” Isabel said in a seductive timbre. She dropped her hand from her chin and looked at her carefully, “Would you have really killed her?”

It was another test.

She inhaled deeply in order to give more weight to her answer, “If I had to; yes,” she told her.

Isabel arched one eyebrow skeptically, “And do you think that you’re actually capable of something like that?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time and it probably won’t be the last,” she said without hesitation or emotion.

Surprise registered on the other woman’s face. Her lips tugged upwards playfully as her dark eyes
danced once again with interest, “Once again you’ve managed to catch me off guard, Miss Smoak.” She took a small step forwards until she was well inside her personal space, “Now I really wish I had gotten to know you sooner. One day soon we’ll have to make plans so you can reveal all of your secrets to me under far more intimate circumstances. Perhaps even over that bottle of wine you mentioned. I’m sure I can scrounge up a nice Merlot if offered the right incentive.”

“You show me yours, Isabel, and I’ll show you mine,” she shot back.

Her eyes glittered at that. Arching her eyebrow slightly, she stepped back and adopted a far more professional expression, “You may want to go shower and finish taking care of your injuries. Gypsy is on her way and Canary and Lady Blackhawk should be here in a few hours along with our new asset.”

“And who would that be?” She asked her.

Isabel merely smiled, “I think I’ll let that be a surprise.” She adopted a note of calm professionalism, “I have a few meetings scheduled this afternoon but I’ll be back before they get here. Ms. Yamashiro will assign you your ID badge and passwords.” She turned away to walk back towards the office before pausing, “I assume you have everything well in hand?”

“Sure,” she said, testing the split on her lip with her tongue. “It’ll give me some time to better acquaint myself with the lay of the land.”

“Excellent,” Her eyes wandered down Felicity’s exposed form briefly, “And should you require assistance, of any kind, you know how to reach me.” She paused, her lips tugging upwards in the semblance of a smile, “If you like, after the rest of the team gets here for the final briefing we could go to dinner together.”

“I would, but I have a family thing and I have to run home soon to relieve my sister,” she told her, making sure to keep her tone casual. “I’m having my place redone and she’s with the decorators; rain check?”

“Absolutely,” the other woman said with a purr before turning neatly on her heel. “Just be sure to let me know when you’re having your house warming. I’ll bring the wine.” She turned to look at her from over her shoulder, “Red, of course.”

As Isabel departed, a seductive gait to her step, all Felicity could think about was how tired she was and how getting her ass kicked was probably going to be the highlight of her day.

*

Grant walked out of the facility, reaching into his pocket for a pack of unfiltered Camels as one of the perimeter security guards approached. “Smoke?” He said, offering the pack to him.

“Naw,” the guy said, patting his chest to indicate he had his own. He hitched his head in the other direction, “You might want to light up over there though.”

“Why? I’m not in the building,” he said with a snort as he tugged up the collar of his jacket, making sure to keep his tone casual as he watched the middle-aged but still fit security guard carefully.

The guy grimaced in sympathy, “Yeah, but they got rules about smoking anywhere on the grounds.”

“Shit,” Grant groused. “Bad enough we got to freeze our asses off, now you’re telling me I got to get in my car just to take a drag?”
The guy leaned toward him, his voice dropping to a confidential level as he kept one eye on the hidden security camera, “Go around the back near the second fire exit under the awning by the loading dock. My buddy fixed the camera so’s we could light up. Just clean up your butts after, okay? There’s a coffee can you can toss ‘em in near the stack of wooden pallets. What these guys don’t know won’t hurt ‘em.”

“Thanks, pal,” he nodded gratefully. “I swear, I am so tired of these fuckin’ health nuts messin’ with my smoke break and whining about cancer all the time. It’s bad enough that they got them taxed so friggin’ high they’re almost seven bucks a pack without treating me like a criminal just because I want to enjoy a smoke. The way I see it, if I want to suck on some coffin nails then just let me die in peace, y’know? Go eat your tofu vegan fat-free namby pamby bullshit over there and just leave me the hell alone.”

“Shit man, you ain’t kiddin’,” the guy said shaking his head ruefully. “My wife tried making me do this thing called ‘Meatless Monday’ once. Said it was because of that global warming shit or over-population or something. She said that the world was gonna run out of meat so we needed to cut back.”

“Yeah?” He said dubiously. “And what did you say?”

“I told her that as long as cows weren’t considered an endangered species, I wasn’t giving up shit.” He nodded at the pack in his hand, “Next time you need some smokes just let me know; I got the hook up. My brother-in-law can get you some right off the back of the truck, if you know what I mean.”

“Damn nice of you, pal; I appreciate it,” he told him with a grateful nod as he stuffed his cigarettes back inside his jacket and pulled out his wallet. “How much for a couple of cartons? I like my Camels but I’ll settle for some Reds.”

“Keep your money, Mr. Grant,” the guy said waving him off. “It’s on me.”

“You sure?” He said with a frown.

“Yeah,” the guy said grinning at him. “Me and my brother-in-law are big fans. My dad took me to see that fight you had against Muhammad Ali back in the day. And that fight you had with Socker Smith; that was real boxing, not that hi-karate MMA bullshit they got all over ESPN nowadays.”

“Yeah, Ali was a tough mother in the ring but a hell of a guy and Socker was good people, too,” Grant said with a nod. “They don’t make fighters like those guys anymore.”

“Sure don’t! I’ll bring you the smokes tomorrow,” he promised then shifted on his feet nervously. “I was wondering; I still got my ticket stub from that fight. Do you think that if I brought it you could…?”

“I’d be happy to sign ‘em for ya if you don’t mind havin’ my chicken scratch all over your memories,” he said easily. “And call me Wildcat.”

“Thanks Mr…Wildcat,” he said with a nervous smile. “Damn, Wildcat Grant; wish my dad was alive to meet you. He was your biggest fan.” He looked up at him uncertainly, “Would you mind if I got a picture? I want to show Tony that I really met you—that’s my brother-in-law.”

“No problem; you got a camera?” He asked.

“Cellphone,” he said, pulling it out of his pocket.
Wildcat pulled a face, “Yeah, I keep forgettin’ them things got cameras now. My son bought me one with this game called ‘Angry Birds’ or some shit on it. Keeps tellin’ me I’d like it if I tried it but I don’t have the time or the patience for that kiddie stuff, y’know?”

The guy chuckled, “Yeah, my kids are always doing that texting stuff on theirs; I can’t figure out why they can’t just call. It’s not like typin’ on that itty bitty keyboard is a big time saver, y’know?” He gestured with his phone and Grant stepped back, getting into a boxing stance with his fits raised so he could snap the pic. “Thanks, Wildcat; Tony’s gonna go nuts when he sees this.”

“Anytime,” he said, shaking his hand firmly and hitching his head towards the back of the building. “I’m going to go smoke a couple before I have to get back in there.”

“Sure thing,” the guy said good-naturedly. “I’ll tell my partner to hold off patrolling on that side for a while so you can have some privacy.”

“I appreciate it,” he said, taking the crumpled pack and his brass Zippo from his pocket as he headed towards the back. As soon as he got to the awning near the loading dock he stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit up, enjoying the sweet smell of the Turkish tobacco and the tang of the lighter fluid. He casually checked the perimeter as he leaned against the wall, keeping his hands warm by shoving them deep inside his coat pockets.

Part of the ‘curse’ that turned him into Wildcat gave him enhanced vision which allowed him to see things in total darkness as well as at great distances. Knowing that if what the little blonde cutie told him was true then—

His eyes zeroed in on a figure almost completely shrouded in darkness on top of one of the outlying canning factories. He could just barely see him, a testament to his training but, then again, the kid might not be quite as good as Bruce but he wasn’t exactly a slouch either. He watched as Nightwing caught sight of him, and gave him an almost imperceptible nod before reaching into his pocket and pulling out his phone.

*I’ve got movement.* He paused, *I’ll be…*

“What is it?” Bruce asked tersely.

*I just spotted an old friend of yours taking a smoke break on this side of the building.*

“How?” At that moment Bruce’s phone began to vibrate and he pulled it out of his pocket to look, “Wildcat.”

*How’d you guess?*

Bruce ignored the question and picked up on the call.

“Hey kid, you’ll never guess who I just met,” Grant said cheerfully. “Seems that you and I have what you might call ‘a mutual friend’.”

“Felicity,” he growled.
A dangerous game is being played here. Tread carefully.
Chapter Forty

Chapter Notes

I made a fancast change. The new face of Colonel Steve Trevor is (drum roll please...)

Jessie Pavelka. Enjoy the mancandy. ;p
Chapter Forty

Oliver sank deep into the leather seat and tried to relax. The attendant had shut all the lights off in the cabin and Luke was already fast asleep and snoring lightly a few feet away. Smart, Oliver thought. Neither of them had gotten any sleep the night before and they’d need to be well rested when they touched down but his mind kept playing through all the possible scenarios they might encounter when they landed.

Felicity could be hurt, she might not be at the factory when they get there, she could be held captive somewhere that they don’t know about, they might be torturing her, she could even be…

He rubbed his hands over his eyes and punched down the pillow under his head. Forcing his eyes closed he willed sleep to come. For all he knew she was perfectly fine; in fact, according to Sara that was most likely the case. Didn’t matter though; she was coming home with him when all this was done.

He tried; he honestly tried to send her away but he couldn’t do it. Right or wrong, she was coming back to Starling. He made a mistake sending her with Wayne. Hell, her own brother even admitted as much. While he didn’t doubt that she probably thought she was in love with him, it was equally obvious that Wayne was taking advantage of that and railroading her into this quickie engagement or whatever the hell it was. No, even if she didn’t remain with him, there was no way he was going to let her make a mistake that could affect the rest of her life like that.

He grimaced and fidgeted slightly in the seat. Just before they split up at the airfield, Sara had taken him aside and warned him that if he did this, if he tried to bring her back, then he couldn’t do it half way. Bringing her back meant making an emotional commitment, one he couldn’t back out from.

He exhaled roughly. Honestly, the very thought of something like that scared the shit out of him. Did he love her? Yeah; yes, he loved her. Was he going to get down on one knee and beg her to marry him; promise her diamond rings, flowers, and blue satin garters? Hell no; that would be ridiculous. He wanted her, he’d be lying if he said he didn’t have feelings for her, but he wasn’t going to pull a fast one like Wayne did and offer to give up his mission for marriage and family. How Felicity even let herself fall for that line of bullshit he had no idea. There was no way Wayne was ever going to give up the Batman and had Felicity been thinking clearly she would have realized that for herself.
He couldn’t and wouldn’t make that kind of promise, but he could at least be honest with her. He could give her more than what he had ever given anyone else even if it fell short of everything she deserved.

Oliver opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling of the cabin. He loved her; he was in love with her. It wasn’t something he could admit until now but, yes, he loved her. His heart raced in his chest and he felt a tidal wave of fear crash over him every time he tried to say the words out loud, but if she needed him to say them, he would. That said, love wasn’t something he took lightly and he’d never had much luck with it. Every woman he’d ever loved, he failed. He cheated on Laurel dozens of times; he couldn’t make it work with Sara, and Shado…Shado paid the ultimate price for his cowardice.

Still, he gave each one of those women his heart; eagerly, quickly, wholeheartedly. He loved each and every one of them but he didn’t love any of them with even a fraction of the depths to which he cared for Felicity and that was truly terrifying. If losing them had left scars on his heart, he knew that losing her would stop it altogether.

It wasn’t a question of whether or not he loved her, it was a question of how much he was willing to lose when he finally admitted it to her and how he dealt with what came after. Love, as far as he was concerned, was an act of pure selfishness. His parents had loved each other and yet his father cheated on Moira time and time again leaving her to slowly descend into bitter desperation.

The first time he caught his father with another woman he was just a kid. It was right before Thea was born and he caught his dad in the pool house with one of the maids. His dad had been apologetic, embarrassed; he’d begged him to not tell and promised he still loved Moira. The maid disappeared and his dad spent the rest of Moira’s pregnancy playing the doting and devoted family man until Oliver allowed himself to forget it had ever happened. The second time he’d caught him was when he was thirteen or fourteen. It was during a party and he had wandered into the kitchen to steal a tray of hors d’oeuvres for him and Tommy. He caught him in the pantry with one of the caterers.

That time had been different. His father didn’t fall all over himself apologizing like he did the first time. Instead he took him aside later and explained that, even though he loved Moira, monogamy just wasn’t a natural state of being for him. That had angered him immensely until he told him that his mother already knew and accepted it. Not believing him, he found his mother and told her what he had seen. To his shock, his mother didn’t cry, she didn’t even appear overly upset, merely embarrassed. She gave him a speech about how his father was a good man even with his weaknesses and that just because he made mistakes that didn’t mean that they should stop loving him.

“Family,” she said, “is more important than fidelity.”

After that life changed for Oliver. He still loved his parents, but a big part of him no longer respected them. He began to act out, get in trouble, drink, do drugs; he lost himself in girls, sex, and parties until one day he came to the realization that he was being a hypocrite. There he was, judging his parents for their perceived sins and acting out, condemning his father for his weaknesses and his mother’s indifference to them, when he was guilty of doing the same damn thing.

The day he came to that realization was the same day he got the call from Sandra. He was still riding the high he felt when she called him to say she’d lost the baby. Breathing a sigh of relief for his close call as Laurel stroked his hair, it came to him; his moment of clarity. The whole time he’d been judging them for their shortcomings, he’d been using his girlfriend as a fallback, relying on his parents to cover for his mistakes, and expecting them to offer him absolution for everything he did while never offering them the same.
Even though he knew that, accepted that, it didn’t stop him from continuing to spiral downward; in fact, it got worse although he became more vigilant about birth control. The first time he cheated on Laurel after vowing to never do it again, he convinced himself that they weren’t exclusive so it didn’t count. That excuse worked for the second and third time as well. The fourth time he cheated, she found out about it and he had to beg her forgiveness which she readily gave on the condition that he never do it again.

That lasted less than a week.

After that she would catch him fairly regularly. Sometimes she’d break up with him but she’d always take him back just like Moira always took back Robert. He even stopped feeling guilty about it after a while. After all, she knew he was cheating on her whether she acknowledged it or not. The way he saw it was that he loved Laurel, everyone else was just sex; as long as he loved only her, the rest didn’t matter. Cheating on Laurel almost became a game, a test of her tolerance levels. How far could he go before she put her foot down? How many girls could she catch him with before flowers and empty promises of fidelity no longer worked?

Ironically enough, he and his father began to bond over their mutual resistance to monogamy. During the summer they’d go on father and son sailing trips where his dad would bring whatever girl he was seeing and he’d invite some random girl along to keep him company as well. His dad never mentioned Laurel and Oliver never mentioned Moira. He began to see his weakness as hereditary, something that was impossible to escape. The one other time his father tried to justify his cheating came the night before they set sail on the Queen’s Gambit for the last time.

His dad had been drinking pretty heavily that night. Robert had his vices but he wasn’t an alcoholic; he’d seen him drink but he’d never seen him drunk before. He’d been in his study and he called Oliver inside and poured him a tumbler of whiskey, inviting him to sit.

Oliver, having left his fourth college in less than two years, had expected a long lecture about responsibility and the importance of buckling down and taking his education seriously, but that’s not what happened. Instead, he told Oliver that marriage, familial obligation, responsibility; all of it was a trap. It was an unnatural state of being and that love wasn’t something that should be confined or labeled. When you tried to tame it by placing rules and edges to it, something was bound to give; either it began to slowly die from suffocation, or you did.

He understood that sentiment as he had also been feeling the walls closing in. At the time Laurel had been pressuring him to move in together and she had been talking about marriage a lot more. She kept dropping these little tidbits here and there like, ‘When we get married...’ or ‘Our kids are going to be much better behaved than that one...’. He was still cheating on her every chance he got, in fact he’d been seeing Sara for weeks, and yet she was still pressuring him for a commitment that she already knew he could never honor.

As he listened to his father’s drunken ramble he realized he was right. He asked him if he could join him on the trip, learn the business, and take a breather from Laurel and the life she had planned for him. He wanted to get away from Laurel’s ‘to do’ lists and plans for how he was supposed to spend the rest of his life and just breathe.

As Felicity would say, it was not the best decision he’d ever made.

It wasn’t until years later that he realized his infidelity was partially based on anger and resentment. It wasn’t her fault, but he cheated primarily because he wanted Laurel to call him on his shit even though she never would. It sounded like circular logic, made no sense whatsoever even to him, but had she truly rejected him and stood to her guns, it would have proven her love to him far better than her forgiveness ever had. Subconsciously he wanted her to show him that they weren’t Moira and...
Robert, that they were better than that. He wanted her to place those limits on him that Moira had
never placed on his father. He sought out Laurel because she offered him structure and discipline;
she became more of a mother to him than Moira in a way because she did press him for more, just
not enough. He saw her as someone who had all the answers, and thought that if anyone could ever
bring him back from the brink it would be her. He wanted her to be that voice in the darkness but,
unfortunately, the iron-willed self-discipline Laurel exhibited in her own life faltered and faded when
it came to him and he again felt cursed. If he couldn't be faithful for her then that meant his father
was right. He was a screw-up, like father like son, it was inevitable, and he began to resent her for
that just as bitterly as he resented his parents for their perceived failures. Just as he rebelled against
them with partying and academic failure, he used his infidelity to rebel against her.

Truth was, half the time he didn’t even care about the sex. He enjoyed it, he just didn't care about it.
It wasn't the sex that motivated him, it was the thrill of seeing what he could get away with and he
got away with a hell of a lot. He even stopped caring about hurting her because it didn’t seem real
anymore. She’d yell and cry, but she’d never leave. Sometimes he didn’t even like her, much less
love her; he just kept going back because she was his constant, always there and always willing to
believe the lies he fed her. No matter how many times he lied and said he’d change, that he'd be
different this time, she accepted his excuses wholeheartedly and assured him that it was always
someone else's fault for leading him astray. If it was love at that point, it wasn't the kind that burned
hot anymore; it was a love borne of convenience and familiarity.

Still, it wasn't until after she'd discovered the texts he’d sent to her sister and forgave him yet again,
even though he'd committed what should have been an unforgivable act of betrayal, that he realized
she wasn't with him because of who he was, she was with him for the same reasons his mother
stayed with Robert. Laurel, like Moira, could see the bigger picture; she had ambition and wanted to
marry into the Queen and Deardon birthrights. Laurel wanted to have that life; lawyer, philanthropist,
judge, perhaps go into local politics then, later on after she’d tamed him and groomed him to her
liking, possibly even the national stage. After all, his grandfather, as so many people were fond of
reminding him, could have easily been president; why couldn't he aspire to such heights? Or, even
better, why couldn't she? Laurel Lance Queen could change the world and Oliver, grandson of
Governor John Patrick Deardon, a man who was still remembered as one of the most beloved
politicians since John F Kennedy, was merely a vehicle towards that end. She didn't love him as
much as she loved the idea of what being with him meant. She, like Moira, was willing to sacrifice
her self-respect and personal happiness for that larger ideal of home, legacy, and country. Whether
she realized it or not, his being stranded on Lian Yu was probably the only thing that saved her from
a life of misery because he probably would have married her only to destroy her just like Robert
destroyed everything pure and loving inside of his mother.

That was almost nine years ago and he was still making the same mistakes over and over again. Here
he was rushing to the side of a woman he’d pushed away only to; what? He ruined Laurel’s life
because he kept pulling her in only to hurt her time and time again. His mistakes set Sara on the path
to becoming a killer.

His selfishness killed Shado.

He couldn’t be a husband. He definitely couldn’t be a father. His son barely even knew who he was;
he wasn’t ‘dad’ to Connor, he was ‘Ollie’. Some other man was ‘dad’ now. He didn’t even know
where his son lived, what his grades were like, what color Sandy had painted his room. He didn’t
even have a picture of him in his wallet. He was a stranger to his own flesh and blood. Would he be
a better father if he and Felicity had children?

Maybe, but it was doubtful. He would be in their lives more but he still wouldn’t be a father. No,
Felicity would be stuck playing the role of sole parent while he showed up every once in a while to
soothe his conscience or to fulfill some obligation. Eventually he’d grow to resent the constraints of a family and he’d wind up destroying not just her, but their kids. He refused to do that to her or to another child and he would not follow in his own father’s footsteps. He was a selfish prick but even he had standards.

He couldn’t match Wayne’s offer, nor would he try. All he could offer her was the life she’d left behind; sleepless nights spent in a basement and days spent wasting her true talents as his EA. Occasionally he might throw her a bit of affection and use her body just like he used everything and everyone else, but it wouldn’t be a happily ever after. It certainly wouldn’t be the life she deserved but would he try to keep her anyway?

Absolutely. A prick with standards was still a prick; that hadn’t changed either.

Not quite, he corrected himself mentally. Oh, he was definitely a self-centered son of a bitch, but if he had even the slightest bit of faith that the life Wayne was offering was any better, he’d tell the pilot to turn the plane around and never bother her again but that wasn’t the case here. Wayne was using her and the Bat was going to get her killed. She might not choose him and she’d be right not to; she deserved better than a scarred and emotionally crippled bastard like him, but she also deserved better than Bruce Wayne. He’d made his fair share of mistakes by her, but at least he tried to keep her out of danger whenever he could and when he couldn’t...

Well, when he had to put her in the shit he didn’t lie to her and he made sure she went in with eyes wide open. He never used her; he always made sure she had an out even when he knew she wouldn’t take it. The one time he did have to put her in the belly of the beast it had nearly killed him, but she handled it beautifully. Still, it wasn’t an experience he cared to repeat which was why he was flying across the country, despite his better judgment, to bring her back. Not that she couldn’t handle herself; he knew she was very capable of holding her own in a fight. More than capable, in fact; but he still wasn’t going to let her go into this alone with no one but Wayne there to manipulate her emotions as he pulled the strings.

After they captured Slade and defeated his Mirakuru enhanced minions, he vowed not to ever risk her life like that ever again. It had led to a few arguments between them; more than a few, in fact. Felicity had begun to train in earnest after being taken by Slade and she started spending more and more time with Lance in particular. He didn’t like it, any of it. The training he could somewhat tolerate but not the extra time she was spending in the Detective’s company.

At the time he was of the mind that Felicity’s burgeoning friendship with Lance on their ‘off’ hours skirted a very dangerous line. When she admitted to him one day that in addition to all of their lunches and dinners together that Lance had been taking her down to the police range along with Diggle to teach her how to shoot, he’d nearly lost it. It led to a massive argument, one of the worst they’d ever had. He’d damn near accused her of...

Whatever, he thought as he exhaled sharply. He hadn’t meant it. He knew the Detective’s affections for her were benign at best, but it didn’t stop the feelings of possessiveness he'd always felt where she was concerned from gnawing at his insides. She was his; his responsibility, his guiding light, and he didn't like sharing that with anyone least of all Quentin Lance. Mostly though, he hated seeing a gun in her hands and he hated that Lance was the one to put it there even though Dig had begun joining them on their outings. It certainly didn’t help that she proved to be remarkably proficient with small firearms much to both Diggle and Lance’s amusement and his dismay. It made him feel as though Lance were casting judgment on his ability to keep her safe; that he was putting an instrument of death in her hands because he knew that eventually her association with the Arrow would lead to her having to face a kill or be killed situation.
As it turned out, he wasn’t wrong.

He stood on the roof of a building and looked over his city; a city that was finally coming back to its former glory. Just a little over a year before, Slade and his Blood Army’s rampage had nearly managed to destroy it but, through the efforts of his company and the community, it was nearly back to what it had been.

A few reminders still existed here and there. Some burned and crumbled buildings, a heavier police presence, and stricter curfews still lingered but, all in all, the city was getting better every day. That didn’t mean the Arrow could retire his hood. Crime still ran rampant throughout the Glades and every time he shut one drug ring down another rose from the ashes. Even so, he could feel a change in the air; his mission was finally seeing results.

He should be happy, but he wasn’t. His city might be recovering but his personal life was still a mess. Even without the specter of Slade looming over their heads, they’d taken a few hits. Thea came back but with her came the emotional fallout from his perceived betrayal of her trust along with revelations about more of their mother’s secrets. He discovered he had a son only after Merlyn had attempted to take him as punishment for Thea leaving him and for Tommy’s death. ‘A child for a child’ was what Merlyn had told him. They got Connor back but at a cost. Not only did Merlyn get away but, in an effort to protect his son and Sandra, he’d signed away his custody and allowed Waller to take them into ARGUS Witness Protection.

He found and lost his son in a matter of days and a month later he was still reeling from it. To make matters worse, Roy was back in town and had begun to spend time in the Foundry trying to make up with Thea while refusing to rejoin their mission and being a general pain in his ass. He’d nearly come to blows with the younger man earlier that night until Dig basically kicked him out and told him to blow off some steam by running patrols. His foul mood wasn’t entirely Roy’s fault. He’d been on edge for weeks, his relationships strained to the breaking point with his entire team. Laurel had left for Central City to visit her mother and to punish him, Sara had taken off again, and Felicity... Things between them had been off since they found out about Connor. He could see the disappointment in her eyes even as she comforted him the night he broke down into tears, weeping in her lap like a child. When he compounded that mistake by almost kissing her that night, drunk and stinking of sweat, blood, and booze behind the bar, she began to pull further away. If Thea hadn’t walked in when she did... And then there was the fight they had just the day before over her growing friendship with Detective Lance. The older man had started showing up at their office regularly to take her to lunch and dinner, even going so far as to take her to the SCPD gun range on the weekends to teach her how to shoot. He hadn't meant to come off sounding as though he were accusing her of something inappropriate, but that's exactly what happened. Even though he’d apologized to Felicity she refused to come back to the mission or to the office until after the weekend because she, quote, ‘deserved a break from hooded asshats’. She also refused to stop seeing Lance on her ‘off’ hours even after he expressed his concerns that the Detective was getting far too close for comfort.

He was debating going over to Felicity’s house to try to convince her to return to the Foundry sooner rather than later when the phone in his pocket began to vibrate. As soon as he saw who it was, his jaw clenched.

“Hello Amanda,” he said coolly. He’d been expecting the other shoe to drop and for her to call in his favor ever since he asked her to help relocate Sandy and Connor. He’d known when he asked that it came with strings attached, it was just a matter of how many favors she pulled and how far he was willing to go to get whatever task she set before him done.
“Meet me on top of the Ostrander Hotel in twenty minutes.”

Before he could reply she had already hung up. Growling in frustration he briefly considered ignoring her ‘request’, but Merlyn was still on the move and for all he knew she might have word on his location.

Less than twenty minutes later he was standing on the roof of the hotel and facing Amanda Waller and a tall blond man he’d never seen before, along with two security officers in black suits and ties he dismissed as not being an immediate threat but whom he still kept in sight. Quickly sizing him up, he could tell that not only was this man military despite being dressed in civvies, but that Amanda definitely didn’t like the fact that he was there at all.

“Who’s your friend, Amanda?” Oliver asked tersely as he gripped his bow tightly in one hand but didn’t reach for his quiver.

“Colonel Steve Trevor,” the man said stepping forward but not bothering to extend his hand as it was fairly obvious that Oliver was not in a particularly receptive mood.

“You’re out of uniform, Colonel,” Oliver said in the low tones of the Arrow. His eyes swept the man from head to toe, assessing his stance and physical presence.

Physically they were well matched; same height and weight, both blond and blue eyed, although Trevor’s short military cut was far lighter and more sun-streaked than his own dark ash blond. He had the deep bronzed tan of a surfer or an outdoors-man cluing him in on the fact that this was a man who would never be content with merely sitting behind a desk all day. Furthermore, he could tell that despite the shallow laugh lines that had begun to form at the corners of his eyes due to sun damage, Trevor was around his same age, early to mid-thirties, making his rank of Colonel even more impressive. They even had similar builds; muscular without being bulky, more than you would see on a runner but less than a body builder, and he moved like a man who could handle himself in a fight. This man was no pencil pusher, that’s for sure.

His eyes skimmed his hips and torso. It was muggy and humid so Trevor had foregone a jacket and was dressed in a light cotton short-sleeved button down shirt and tan khakis with a leather encased tablet held loosely in his hand and a tan leather messenger bag at his feet that was distressed from use rather than design. He was definitely not a stuck up business type, but a man who was less concerned with maintaining the appearance of power and more with functionality and action. His shoulder holster was openly on display and Oliver was fairly certain the man had at least one back-up piece but, other than that, he wasn’t hiding anything.


“The fact that you’re standing next to the Director of ARGUS might contradict that,” he replied just as easily.

“Actually, Amanda is no longer the Director,” Trevor said, and Amanda tensed up beside him, throwing him a look that bordered on pure hatred. His lips quirked upwards as if he could sense her gaze even though he wasn’t looking at her, “Or I should say, Amanda is now the Deputy Director with me acting as primary, unofficially at least.”

That made Oliver’s lip twitch upwards despite himself, “I take it that Oversight wasn’t too happy about the idea of ARGUS sending out an MQ-9 Reaper on a kill-chain to take out five hundred thousand people in order to contain fifty?” The shit-storm over the entire Blood Army drone scandal had been in the news for months with politicians scrambling to make nice with the voters while pointing fingers left, right, and sideways.
“I did what had to be done,” Amanda said grimly. “I make no apologies. You know what would have happened had Slade and his men gotten out of the city and somehow weaponized the Mirakuru or sold it to terrorists who would either use it themselves, or worse, create thousands of super-powered lunatics by tainting the general blood supply.”

“I know that you played right into his hands,” Oliver said, not giving an inch. “And since it was my team that wound up saving the lives of all those people despite ARGUS’s involvement, forgive me if I don’t say thank you.”

“As I recall, you weren’t so quick to point fingers when I was relocating your child and his mother just a few weeks ago,” Amanda said with a cruel edge causing Oliver’s hand to tense around his bow once more.

His eyes flashed dangerously under his hood, “Is that why you’re here, Amanda? To call in a favor or to blackmail me by using my son as leverage?”

“Neither,” Trevor said, stepping up and throwing Waller a rebuking glance. “We’re here about Slade.”

“What about him?” Oliver growled low in his throat.

“He’s escaped,” Waller said in clipped tones.

“When?” He demanded.

She looked at him steadily, “Three weeks ago; just after we relocated your family.”

“Why the hell wasn’t I told this sooner?” He said angrily, panic licking at the heels of his rage. “Are Sandra and Connor--?”

“They’re fine, Mr. Queen,” Trevor assured him. “They’re both far beyond the reach of Slade and Merlyn, I assure you.”

“Merlyn?” Oliver scowled.

“Malcolm Merlyn is the one who broke Slade out of the Lian Yu facility just after leaving Starling,” Trevor stepped forward and handed Oliver the tablet he’d been holding.

Oliver swung his bow over his shoulder and accepted the tablet, queuing up the footage from inside Slade’s cell.

There was no sound but Oliver watched as Slade lay back in his cot scribbling away at a sketchbook with some charcoal or a pencil. His head lifted curiously as the guard near his cell looked up suddenly and rushed toward the stairs only to be thrown backwards with an arrow imbedded deeply inside his chest. Slade calmly put aside his sketch and sat back on the thin mattress as Merlyn came into view. The two men had a brief discussion before the cell door opened and Slade stepped out. Just before he left the frame, Slade turned to look directly into the camera and mouthed the words, ‘See you soon, kid,’ then smiled.

“I should have been told immediately,” Oliver growled again. He turned a baleful eye towards Waller. “You should have contacted me the second he escaped!”

“You’re right,” Trevor said in agreement. “Perhaps had you been told sooner none of this would have happened.”
“What else happened?” Oliver asked, looking from one to the other.

“That’s classified,” Waller said coldly.

“Bullshit!” He burst out.

“What happened is that, in addition to Merlyn helping Slade escape from Lian Yu, he got hold of a dangerous piece of technology that shouldn’t even be in existence to begin with.” Trevor turned to Waller, his own anger now apparent as he stared down the woman in front of them. “Something ARGUS was enjoined to have destroyed but that Amanda, in violation of a direct order, chose to hide away in an underground bunker instead.”

“Another Markov device?” Oliver asked feeling a chill in his bones at the thought of facing a repeat of the Undertaking.

“Unfortunately no,” Trevor said grimly. “A Markov device, while deadly, is something we can easily contain. The weapon Slade and Merlyn have in their possession is something we’ve taken to calling ‘The Omega Device’.”

He frowned, “A bomb?”

“No,” Trevor said quietly, taking the tablet from him and queuing up a file with a picture of an odd looking circular device around the size of a large crate.

“What is it; what does it do?” Oliver asked, handing him back the tablet.

“We don’t know,” Waller said flatly.

“Bullshit,” Oliver bit out.

“She’s telling the truth,” Trevor said implying that he was tempted to tack on the words ‘for once’ at the end of that sentence. “We don’t know what the device is capable of, only that it’s some kind of weapon of alien origin but that our researchers believe has the capability to produce some sort of massive temporal shockwave.”

“Alien origin?” Oliver repeated. “As in aliens from outer space; you expect me to buy that?”

“Whether you do or not, it doesn’t matter,” Waller told him. “Merlyn has the weapon and he and Deathstroke intend to use it after recreating his Blood Army.”

“How? The Mirakuru was destroyed.”

“We believe Slade is recruiting mercs and using his own blood to distill the Mirakuru,” Trevor told him. “Even though the effects of the drug have been substantially muted due to the anti-serum, these men are already trained killers. Even at less than half the strength of someone administered the full dose of Mirakuru, they are, in a word, formidable.”

Oliver looked from one to the other, “I take it that since you seem to know all this that you’ve been tracking them? Why haven’t you taken them down by now? It’s not like Amanda has ever been shy about dropping bombs before.”

“It’s…complicated,” Trevor said, his lips tightening.

“Try un-complicating it and tell me what the hell is going on,” Oliver told him in an aggressive tone. Trevor sighed and readjusted his stance before speaking, “You were right when you said that
Oversight was none too happy with Amanda after the Blood Army incident last year. As a result of her actions, I was appointed as Head of ARGUS and Amanda was demoted to the secondary position.

“She should have been fired and put in one of her own cells,” Oliver spat out.

“You’re lucky I wasn’t, otherwise your son would still be in Merlyn’s custody,” Waller pointed out coolly.

Oliver started towards her but Trevor stepped between them and spoke directly to her instead, “Watch it; you’re on thin ice with me as it is, Waller.”

“Don’t even try to bully me, Boy Scout,” Waller said with a sneer. “I’m here because I do what needs to be done to keep this country safe. If it wasn’t for me, freaks like Slade would take over and then we’d all be screwed.”

“It’s because of you that Slade has the device to begin with,” Trevor pointed out harshly.

“Look, play the blame game later; right now all I want to know is what Slade and Merlyn want with this device and why you haven’t taken them out yet,” Oliver said impatiently. “Most of all, I want to know why the hell I wasn’t informed of his escape weeks ago!”

He turned back to Oliver, “First, I wasn’t lying when I said that we have no real idea as to its origins or what it’s truly capable of which is why we were reluctant to drop high powered explosives on it to begin with. The last time it was damaged, it malfunctioned, took out an entire building, and somehow ‘displaced’ one of the subjects who came in contact with it for nearly five months. He reappeared out of thin air next to the device in our containment facility unconscious and badly dehydrated. After he was treated for his injuries and revived, he spoke of being sent through some kind of time distortion.”

“Are you sure he wasn’t just crazy?” Oliver said dubiously.

“He was quite sane,” Amanda said coldly. “He was interrogated thoroughly by me personally.”

“And by ‘interrogated’ you mean ‘drugged and tortured’,” Oliver said drolly. “You and your soft heart, Amanda; how is it you’ve never been nominated for Humanitarian of the Year?” He turned to Trevor, “What about you, Colonel? Did you approve this ‘interrogation’ personally or was this all on Director Waller’s watch?”

“No, it was not on my authority but as soon as I was made aware of the situation the subject was retconned and released,” he told him.

“Retconned?” Oliver repeated. “Well, I suppose having your memories wiped is better than a bullet to the brain.”

“It was a matter of National Security,” Waller said in clipped tones.

“Funny how that’s your answer for everything.”

“That’s because it usually is,” Waller retorted.

“Enough,” Trevor warned her harshly before turning back to Oliver. “Given what we learned from our investigation into the device, scientists believe it’s some sort of temporal displacement weapon, a device that affects time as well as space, and sends out a shockwave powerful enough to take out every living thing inside of a ten mile radius without affecting buildings or other inanimate objects.”
Amanda crossed her arms over her chest, “In other words, it’s a clean weapon.”

“Anything that can kill every man, woman, and child for twenty square miles isn’t a clean anything,” Oliver said in disgust.

“Which is why ARGUS was ordered to have it dismantled as soon as we were finished cataloguing it; an order Amanda apparently disregarded,” Trevor said angrily.

“That device has the potential to end wars, take out whole terrorist camps while leaving valuable intel and assets intact without risking the lives of our soldiers,” Waller said stubbornly. “Besides, we had no way of proving that it would actually harm anyone. The subject—!”

“If he’s to be believed then ‘the subject’ just bumped into the device and set it off, losing five months of his life in the process!” Oliver shot back. “What happens if Merlyn decides to set that thing to go off in the heart of the city?”

“Which, again, is why we don’t want to risk dropping a bomb on their location,” Trevor told him. “The original plan was to ship the device to an abandoned military base about 300 miles away from Starling City so it could be carefully taken apart then destroyed one piece at a time. Instead, when the device arrived at the base, Amanda ordered that it be sealed in a bunker until such time as it could be further studied.”

He looked at him askance, “How did Slade and Merlyn find out about this bunker or the device to begin with?”

“That’s the other reason we haven’t made our move,” Trevor told him. “Someone leaked the classified documents related to the device as well as the location of the bunker to a high-end information broker. Until we find the mole, we can’t risk officially opening an investigation or sending in troops. Not only that, but there is the possibility it isn’t a member of ARGUS who leaked the information at all, but a member of Oversight itself. Admitting Amanda’s indiscretion,” he tossed a hard look in her direction, “would give them the justification they’d need to shut ARGUS down once and for all.” He took a deep breath, “I realize that ARGUS hasn’t always been a friend to you and your mission, but our continued existence is vital to maintaining our nation’s security and has been for over two hundred and forty years now. While I would love to watch Waller be put in chains and jailed for treason, doing so would affect not just her but ARGUS as a whole.”

“So you want my team and the Suicide Squad to go in unofficially and take out Slade and Merlyn so you can retrieve the device safely,” Oliver concluded.

“Not the Suicide Squad,” Trevor told him. “ARGUS has to be completely hands off. Task Force X will act as your back-up only. Also, should you fail to secure the device, you’ll have no other choice but to destroy it.”

“You just said you couldn’t do that without risking this thing going off,” Oliver said with a scowl.

“Our researchers have posited that if you set off a lower intensity blast from a C-4 charge while the machine is powered down, it might minimize the potential fallout. Even so, you’re right; it’s a risk. This could very well be a suicide mission.”

“Then why the hell should I send my team in when you won’t even risk the lives of the criminals and murderers you’ve collected for Waller’s little social experiment?” Oliver asked angrily.

“Two reasons,” Waller said with a sly look. “Because you have a personal grudge against both Slade and Merlyn and we both know you’ll hunt them down on your own with or without our help. And
secondly, that kind of obsession swings both ways.”

“What is she talking about?” Oliver growled.

Trevor bent down and removed a thick white sketchpad from the leather case, “You remember on
the video that Slade was drawing something?”

“Yeah, what of it?” Oliver asked carefully.

“It appears he’s become fixated on a member of your team,” he said, giving him a sympathetic look.
“We believe Slade is planning on targeting her specifically.”

Oliver accepted the pad numbly, “Thea?” He asked, thumbing through the charcoal and pastel
drawings.

“No.”

The first several sketches were all of Shado in various poses; sometimes smiling, sometimes not.
Slade was a remarkably talented artist and they were almost photorealistic, so much so that Oliver
could almost hear the celestial beauty’s tinkling laugh as he traced her image with his eyes. About
halfway through the book though, another form began to emerge.

Felicity.

Oliver felt his breath catch in his throat. At first the two women were pictured side by side, almost
like sisters or best friends. Images of Felicity laying her head on the other woman’s shoulder, of her
stringing daisies through Shado’s dark hair as they lay in a field, then darker more sensual images as
they lay sleeping tangled and naked in rumpled bed sheets as though Slade had sketched them
following a passionate ménage à trois.

Oliver flushed with anger but continued to flip through the book, his rage growing with every turn of
the page. Soon Shado’s image faded until only Felicity remained. The book was filled with page
after page of Felicity in various poses; both clothed and unclothed, each one more passionately
drawn and detailed than the last. Some were blatantly sexual but most were more intimate, bordering
on romantic; the last one being of her in a modestly styled white lace gown, her golden curls loose
and tumbling over her shoulders as she stroked her obviously pregnant belly. She was looking down
at it, a small contented smile playing at her lips as though he’d caught her in a moment of quiet
contemplation.

“What the fuck is this shit?” Oliver practically yelled, throwing it down in disgust.

“We believe that Slade has transferred his obsession with the woman referred to as ‘Shado’ onto Ms.
Smoak,” Waller said without emotion.

“Obviously!” He spat out. “Why the fuck wasn’t I told about his new foray into crazy sooner? I
should have been told about this and I definitely should have been informed as soon as Merlyn got
him out of that prison, if for no other reason than to keep Felicity safe!”

Waller narrowed her eyes, “As we said, it was a matter of national sec—!”

“Fuck you, Amanda; and fuck national security!” He raged, pointing an accusing finger in her
direction. “I had a goddamn right to know about this!” He kicked the pad with his foot so hard it
skidded across the rooftop, “You already know what this sick son of a bitch is capable of; he
murdered my mother in front of me and my sister! You knew he was obsessed with her and yet you
—!” Beyond words he started towards her until Trevor stepped in his path, preventing him from
throttling the stony faced woman in front of him.

“You’re right,” Trevor told him. “You should have been told right away but the reason you weren’t informed was because no one was,” Trevor told him. “No one knew, outside of Amanda’s department, about Slade’s new fixation or that he had escaped until less than twenty-four hours ago.” His eyes were dark with anger of his own but none of it was directed at Oliver. “As soon as this was brought to my attention, I had new sat images taken and had you called in.”

“What are you--?” He turned a threatening eye on Waller. “You hid this on purpose?”

“Of course I did,” She snorted. “Had I informed Oversight that Slade had escaped they would have issued a Sanction Black, Kill On Sight order. Even at half his former strength Slade was a potential asset that I felt was too valuable to risk. My intentions were to take him in alive then neutralize him and integrate him into Task Force X. Unfortunately, the Colonel’s pet hacker is just as resourceful as yours apparently.”

“And a few weeks ago when you tried to recruit her? No, when you tried to *manipulate* her into joining ARGUS by threatening my team; what were you planning on doing if she took you up on your offer, Amanda? Use her to manipulate Slade by dangling her like bait?” He stormed.

“If need be,” she said coolly.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Oliver stepped forward, his voice dropping menacingly. “You’re a fucking sociopath, you know that? That monster has been running around free for weeks, fixating on Felicity, and you thought it was more important to save his life than protect her much less the rest of this city?!”

She observed his rage with a dispassionate air, “No, Oliver; I’m not a sociopath, I’m a patriot. Men like Slade Wilson are a tool, just as people like Ms. Smoak are a tool, and I intend to use them to win this war, and it is a war, once and for all.”

“What war, Amanda? What the fuck are you talking about?” He nearly yelled at her.

“Take a look around you,” she said coldly. “The world is bigger than Starling City and your mission. Freaks like Slade, aliens, meta-humans; they are a threat, not only to this country, but to the human race as a whole! ARGUS is on the front lines of this war to save humanity and if that means using a tool like Slade or sacrificing one pretty blonde in order to keep him in line then, yes; I would have handed her to him on a silver platter and I make no apologies for it. Unlike you, I have to look at the bigger picture.”

Oliver started forward again but Trevor beat him to it. “I’m sure you think you’re a patriot Amanda, but the truth is that you’re just as much a threat to National Security as any terrorist if not more so because you seem to have no problem with risking the lives and safety of hundreds of thousands of people in order to promote your own twisted agenda,” Trevor said, his eyes as cold as ice. “You kept your job by the skin of your teeth last time through blackmail and political pull and you’ve been running ARGUS your way for so long now that you think you’re invulnerable. Well, let me clue you onto something, Dr. Waller,” Trevor said tersely, he head tilted toward her, “you’re not as untouchable as you think you are and the days of you doing whatever the hell you want with ARGUS and its resources are over. Also, I’m not as big a Boy Scout as you imagine so, if I were you, I’d watch my step.” He stepped into her personal space causing the two men in black who had been standing several feet back to move forward.

“So what is it you think you can do to me, Steve?” Amanda said with sickly sweetness. “Erase me? You don’t have the authority or the balls for that.” She said, holding up her hand and making a
gesture that had the guards reaching for their side arms and Oliver reaching for his bow.

As soon as her hand went up there was a whoosh of air being displaced and both members of her personal security detail dropped to the ground causing both Oliver and Amanda to tense while Trevor remained perfectly calm. “It’s not my balls on the chopping block, Amanda; it’s yours, and while yours might be bigger, mine came better prepared.”

“What the hell are you playing at?” Amanda asked, a hint of nervousness entering her tone and she looked over at her two men who were now lying motionless on the ground.

Oliver looked toward where the shots had originated to see Deadshot grinning from a nearby rooftop. “Why bother telling me all this if you were just going to take me out anyway?” He asked, bow in hand but not bothering to reach for his quiver. Lawton could cut him down before he even managed to notch an arrow anyway.

“Not you, Mr. Queen; that was merely a demonstration for Amanda’s benefit alone. I needed to prove to her that, not only was I aware of her plans to regain her former position as sole head of ARGUS, but that she is no longer in charge of Task Force X effective immediately,” Trevor told him, giving Amanda a hard look. At that moment the roof access door opened and two men that Oliver recognized as being Raven and Torque from the Suicide Squad emerged.

“What is this?” Amanda asked as the two men flanked her.

“S’up Arrow,” Raven said bobbing his head at Oliver.

“Hey man,” Torque greeted him. “Just like old times, huh?” He looked at Waller with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“What is this?” Amanda repeated a bit more stridently.

“Looks like you’re busted, boss lady,” Raven said with a snort. “Again.”

“Please escort Ms. Waller to her vehicle and instruct Mr. Turner to keep her there then come back for her associates. Also let the others know that I’ll be along shortly,” Trevor told them.

“Sure thing, Colonel,” Raven said, rocking back on his heels.

“Just what the hell do you think you’re doing, Trevor?” Amanda growled.

“Arresting you,” he said with a raised eyebrow. “Gentlemen.”

“After you, Amanda,” Torque said with an exaggerated gesture of chivalry.

Waller, however, appeared unmoved. “You don’t have the authority--!”

“I think I do,” Trevor told her. “If she resists, feel free to use force.”

“Oh please,” Raven grinned at her, “resist.”

She turned to leave but not before giving him another venom-filled glare, “I will bury you.”

“Others have tried, Amanda; and yet, I’m still here. Balls and all,” he said with a slightly amused look.

After the access door shut leaving only himself, Trevor, and the two unconscious guards, Oliver looked at the other man with open hostility, “While I appreciate you letting me witness Amanda’s
comeuppance, what the hell does ARGUS intend to do with Slade and Merlyn if I bring them in again?"

“You won’t be bringing them in,” Trevor told him flatly. “On the off chance that you do survive this mission, Merlyn and Slade as well as their infected mercenaries must be neutralized permanently.”

“You want me to act as ARGUS’s executioner.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.” Trevor said without balking, his eyes hard. “We’re both soldiers, Mr. Queen; both of us know that to save lives, sometimes others must die. These men are dangerous and they represent a clear and present danger to the security of this country and its people.”

“And yet, knowing how important this mission is and how unlikely we are to succeed, you’d rather risk this city and countless lives rather than your own ass.”

“Mr. Queen, if I thought that putting my life on the line is what it would take then I’d do it in a heartbeat,” he told him. “Unfortunately, as much as I want to storm in there and handle this myself, I have to look at the bigger picture. If something happens to the Squad and Oversight finds out about this mission, we’re done. As much as it pains me to say it, you and your team are expendable; the Suicide Squad and I are not. Not now anyway,” he added. “What I will do however is this,” he stepped toward him, his expression open and sincere. “You will have every piece of tactical information I can give you and I, as well as the Squad, will be acting as your back up. If you fail, we’ll come in but only as a last resort. We’ll also provide you with gear, weapons, whatever you need to get it done as well as ammo that has been treated with the altered anti-serum to prevent their injuries from healing immediately.”

To say he wasn’t impressed was an understatement, “So the plan is to have you and your guys swoop in after me and mine are dead and, what? Handle clean up?”

“Basically,” he admitted. “We’ll be waiting on coms ten miles outside of the estimated range of the weapon. If anything goes wrong, if your team is unsuccessful or if there is the possibility of the device getting out of the containment area, we’ll expect you to make the call and then we’ll either go in or I’ll personally call in an airstrike.”

“And you honestly think I’ll just agree to sacrifice the lives of my team like that?” Oliver asked, his face a mask of barely contained fury.

“I do, Mr. Queen,” Trevor said with quiet assurance. “You and the people who fight with you are heroes and sacrificing themselves for the greater good is what heroes do.”

Oliver paused, his mind playing through every possible scenario, “I can’t guarantee they’ll agree to this and I won’t force them. It will be their choice to make.”

“Agreed,” Trevor said with a nod. “And if it comes down to it, some of the Squad members have agreed to step up if necessary.”

“You just said their lives were too valuable, remember?” Oliver said nastily.

“This is their country too, Mr. Queen,” the other man told him without heat. “They may have started out as criminals but they know that what they do serves a higher purpose. No man is beyond redemption.”

“And yet you want me to take out Slade and Merlyn,” he shot back.

“I should have said ‘almost no man is beyond redemption’,” he corrected himself. “The truth is that
Amanda wasn’t completely wrong when she said I couldn’t touch her. I can’t have her disappear or just imprison her; she’s the public face of ARGUS. As far as the world is concerned I’m just a retired plane jockey and that’s the way it has to stay. As long as groups like this ‘HIVE’ organization keep targeting our leadership, I need to stay dark. Amanda will continue to be seen as the sole head of ARGUS while my job is officially listed as merely being a consultant. That will continue until such time as we’ve taken HIVE down and captured our mole or we’re able to prove that they’ve gone dark permanently.”

“That’s another thing,” Oliver said coldly. “Do you people really think it’s just a coincidence that once Waller lost her power position at ARGUS, HIVE went underground? Or are you just covering both her ass and your own?”

“I have no illusions as to what Amanda is capable of,” he told him. “I’ve had her interrogated and investigated thoroughly. Whatever else she may be, she’s not a member of HIVE. However, that doesn’t mean she’s getting away with anything.”

“Looks like it from where I’m standing,” Oliver shot back.

“I may not be able to do anything ‘official’ but what I can do is see to it she’s made a permanent member of the Squad herself since she feels so territorial towards them, right down to the bomb in her brain stem,” Trevor said with a hint of grim satisfaction. “If I am wrong and she’s HIVE then they won’t risk her breaking ranks once they find out about the implant and they’ll come after her. If not, then it will still neutralize her as a threat but only temporarily. Even with the implant Waller is still a political shark. Elections are coming up and she is very good at finding the right people’s pressure points and stacking the odds in her favor. If we take Merlyn and Slade in, not only will there be a possibility of this happening again, but it would expose ARGUS to further scrutiny.” He paused for a moment, “No matter what happens, you won’t be alone in this. Even if your entire team chooses to bow out, Lawton has already volunteered to take a spot as have Raven and Torque and, as a last resort, I’ll go in as your fifth man.”

“I was expecting you to say that the Bronze Tiger would be our fifth if my team bowed out,” he snorted. “Aren’t you a little too high up on the food chain for a suicide mission, Colonel?”

“I don’t trust Mr. Turner to keep his claws sheathed around the weapon,” Trevor told him. “Besides, you’ve got to die of something but I’m fairly certain your team won’t let you face this alone.”

That was true; in fact that was so accurate his blood ran cold. Each and every one of his team would follow him into hell and back in a heartbeat.

Especially Felicity, and there was no way in hell he was letting either her or Thea near this.

“What happens to the ones we leave behind?” Oliver asked at last, “Our friends, family, the members of my team who I decide aren’t vital to the mission?”

“Mr. Queen—Oliver,” Trevor’s eyes held his for a heartbeat, “I swear to you that your son and his mother will be kept safe as will Mr. Diggle’s sister-in-law and nephew. Detective Lance and his daughter, Laurel, will be given the standard explanations and they will be offered the opportunity for relocation should Merlyn or Slade escape but we feel they are at lower risk than the rest of you for retaliation. As for your sister and Ms. Smoak,” he hesitated. “They will both be offered places within ARGUS that are conducive to their individual skillsets or, if they prefer, new identifications and relocation.”

“Unacceptable; I don’t want ARGUS getting their hands on Felicity or Thea under any circumstances,” Oliver said firmly.
“It will be optional; no one will force them to do anything they don’t want to,” he assured him. “If Ms. Smoak or your sister want ARGUS to back off we’ll give them as much room as we can, although we will occasionally have to check in.” At Oliver’s stormy expression, he grimaced, “Look, I’m being as straight with you as I can. Your sister and Ms. Smoak are a big part of your mission. ARGUS will always have to keep tabs on them, not just for security reasons but because of their association with you and ours. You’ve made a lot of enemies; we’re not going to just leave them out in the cold with targets on their backs, but we’re also not going to force them into joining our ranks either. That said, if they do choose to join ARGUS then I promise they’ll come under my command personally.”

“And why should I trust you on that?” He asked.

“All I have is my word,” Trevor said simply. “One man to another; if anything happens to you, I’ll see to it that they are kept safe.”

Oliver had learned to trust his instincts a long time ago so, as reluctant as he was to trust anyone connected to ARGUS, he nodded. “When?” Oliver asked, his face hidden in shadow.

“Tomorrow at 1800 hours I’ll text you the coordinates then meet with you and your team at an airstrip approximately twenty miles from the base. We’ll go over all the sat feeds and topographical images and hook you guys up with whatever you need.” He offered him his hand, “You’re doing the right thing, Oliver.”

Oliver accepted his handshake and moved to the side of the building to pick up the now battered sketch pad. He weighed it in his hand for a moment before looking up at the other man. “Keep this off the books for as long as possible; there can’t be anything about it on ARGUS’s servers. And if you have any copies of these,” his mouth twisted in disgust as he indicated the sketch pad, “I want them destroyed. Felicity can’t ever see them, understood?”

“We’re well aware of Ms. Smoak’s formidable hacking skills,” he said with a look of understanding. “I have my own version of your assistant by the name of Etta and if someone ever…” He paused, “Well, let’s just say that I get where you’re coming from. I should also tell you that she’s become somewhat of a fan of your girlfriend. I’ve never met your girl but I have the feeling that if the two of them ever got together they could take over the world by dinner time. I’ll call and have her take care of it tonight.”

Oliver didn’t bother correcting him on the status of his relationship with Felicity; it was none of his business, he merely nodded instead. “Just…just keep them safe, that’s all I ask.”

“Like I said, if something should happen to you or your team I’ll handle it personally,” Trevor said solemnly. “No one will ever lay a finger on either of your girls; I promise.”

Oliver tucked the pad into his jacket before zipping it up, then fired a cable onto the other building and left without saying another word.

Really, there was nothing left to say.

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He never found out how Felicity caught wind of the mission and he didn’t ask. He knew none of his team would have told them and he doubted Trevor would have been careless enough to leave it on ARGUS’s servers after his warning. In any case, the point was moot. Felicity found out about the mission and recruited Lance as her back-up, leaving Thea behind on coms.
That was the first time she had ever shed blood; the first time she had ever seen a life snuffed out by her own hands. Things between them changed forever after that. There was a look in her eyes after that day; the sense of loss within her gaze became palatable. Lance and Dig might have put the gun in her hand and taught her how to use it, but he’s the one who exposed her to the mission to begin with. She may have been no stranger to the world of masks before their first meeting, but he’s the one who turned her into a killer.

Oliver took a deep breath and ran his hand over his furrowed brow. He had stolen so much of Felicity’s joy and innocence; his mistakes as far as she was concerned were numerous and unconscionable in their breadth, but he wouldn’t make another by abandoning her.

She might be in love with Wayne now, but she was still his girl, and no one was going to lay a finger on her.
“This sucks,” Thea said discontentedly as she sat slumped in the unoccupied chair closest to the workstation.

“What are you complaining about now?” Roy asked her as he reached into the cooler for a water.
They had all come back into the Lair earlier than usual so Barbara could help monitor coms and Dig and Tim had decided to occupy their time by working out. He glanced over at where they were sparring with the sticks again.

Thea shot him a dirty look, “You want to know what I’m complaining about: How about the fact that I had to spend the entire day working in Oliver’s office, taking one boring meeting after the other and walking around with Tim pretending like I actually knew what I was doing. Then, when all that was done, instead of doing my own thing I have to come back here to this stupid basement while Oliver is off acting like a dumbass and I can’t even go on patrols or anything later because I still have to do my job at the club tonight then go home so I can get up to do his again! I can’t believe he just stuck me with having to do all of his stupid crap,” she sulked and kicked out with her foot causing her chair to swing around. “I mean, here I am, stuck watching a bunch of gross shirtless dudes sweat all over everything after doing Ollie’s job all day while he goes off like a total asshat to save Felicity even though she doesn’t need to be saved,” she said with a angry sneer followed by another bored spin in the chair, her hands gesticulating in annoyance, “and I still have to do my job at the club tonight then go home so I can start this whole sucky process all over again. I mean, I don’t even get to arrow anybody because, even if I could go out, Ollie won’t let me! He’s not even here and I’m still grounded! I’m a hero, too, you know.” She scowled. “Sara was right: If he had just kept it in his pants around Isabel to begin with none of this would be happening. Stupid Ollie and his stupid penis; this is all his fault! Plus, I don’t even get to meet Batman because Ollie is being a total bone-head!” She pouted. “I really wanted to meet him, too. The only other real hero besides these guys I ever got to meet was Barry and he’s okay, but he is so not Batman.”

“You aren’t missing much, Chickie; trust me,” Barbara said with a snort as she continued to track police chatter. “He’s an ass. Then again, all masks are asses; Bruce is just a particularly unpleasant type of ass.”

“He must have something going for him if Felicity and he have a thing,” she pointed out. Tim and Dig wandered over and Roy threw them both waters without them having to ask. “Plus he looked kind of hot.”

“He’s not that hot,” Roy muttered.

“He’s eye-candy for sure, and he knows how to fill out a suit, but all that is connected to a true blue asshole, Chickadee. While there is no doubt in my mind that Bruce is probably a rollercoaster in the sack, trust me when I say that once he opens his mouth he quickly starts to lose his appeal,” Barbara grinned at her.

“Then why does Felicity put up with him?” Thea asked.

“Honestly, not a clue; I know I wouldn’t but, then again, the way Bruce is with Baby is different than he is with everybody else,” she told her. “Trust me, the man does a complete 180 when she walks into the room. I mean, he’s still an ass but the minute he sees her, he goes from everybody’s favorite asshole to ‘asshole lite’. He’s still got his head jammed up his butt, but he gets so focused on her that he tends to forget to be a grumpy bastard…for a little while at least,” Barbara shook her head, “It’s a temporary respite at best though; as soon as she leaves the room he goes back to being an ass again. All I can say is God help that girl because I know I couldn’t put up with him. If I had to marry him I’d probably wind up killing him before we ever left the church.”

“Got that right,” Tim said ruefully.

“What was Felicity like before she came here, anyway?” Roy asked them. “I mean, she never talks about her past at all. Until all this happened I always thought she was pretty normal; just a cute
computer chick who somehow got mixed up in the Arrow’s mission, and now, come to find out, she was in a family full of vigilantes or something and used to date the only guy more hardcore bad-ass than Oliver on the planet.”

“Hey, I’m pretty bad-ass,” Dig said, wiping his face on a hand towel before cracking open his water and taking a sip.

“You’re a bad-ass but you aren’t hardcore like Oliver,” Roy told him.

“Granted, Oliver played may have played Gilligan on the Island of the Damned for five years, but I was Special Forces and did three tours hip deep in the shit,” Dig said, casting a baleful eye. “I’m plenty hardcore.”

“And yet Oliver still wins,” Roy threw back.

“After I finish my water, you and I are having a go on the mats and we’ll just see about that,” Dig told him with a dark look.

At that moment the door to the Foundry opened and Lance walked in, “Where the hell is everybody?” He asked, balancing a large box filled with take-away and some bags. “Don’t everybody get up to help at once; after all I just had a heart attack, what? A little over a year ago; I can handle it.” Roy and Tim both moved to intercept and helped with the boxes which he promptly handed over, “I brought Thai. I figured you could use some vegetables since all you people ever seem to eat are greasy burgers and protein bars down here.”

“Ooh, did you bring the duck noodles?” Thea asked with a precocious grin as she lifted her head to peer at the boxes of food being placed on the low table in front of the couch.

“Of course I brought the duck noodles, are you kidding?” Lance said with a snort as he walked over to hand her a soft drink. “I also ordered everything without nuts even though Felicity isn’t here. Hope you guys don’t mind; force of habit, plus I’ve just gotten used to how it tastes without them,” he said, glancing over toward the two newcomers. “By the way, Quentin Lance,” he said introducing himself and shaking first Tim’s then Barbara’s proffered hands. “I know we sort of met over the coms but I figured I’d come down and introduce myself.” He looked around the Lair, “Where’s Oliver; still at the office?”

“Gotham,” Roy said around a mouth full of noodles.

“Why the hell is he there?” Lance said with a frown. “He goin’ after Felicity?”

“Yup,” Thea told him with a grin.

“About damn time, if you ask me,” Lance said gruffly as he reached for the box with the duck noodles and a fork before Roy got to them.

“Careful,” Thea warned as she took the food from him. She pointed her plastic fork in Tim’s direction, “She’s supposed to be getting married to his dad.”

“You’re Tim; Bruce Wayne’s kid, right?” He asked, looking him over as the other man nodded. “Yeah, Dig briefed me on the new masks in town plus I talked to Barb here on the phone the other day.” He paused to glance at Barbara, “Nice to meet you both and thanks for the assist last night. It was good work.”

“No problem,” Tim told him.
“We were happy to help and thanks for the food, by the way,” Barbara told him.

“Call it a reward for helping me get a few scumbags off the street; for a little while anyway,” Lance told them. “I doubt either of them are out for the count but every little bit helps.” He looked over to his own team, “So, Felicity’s marrying Batman? When the hell did that happen?” He shook his head, “And here I thought her being mixed up with Queen was bad news. Remind me to call her later and give her a good ass-chewin’; I swear, that girl has the worst taste in men.” He looked at the younger man beside him, “No offense meant towards your dad, son. I’m sure he’s a good man but I’m not too keen about any of these girls getting mixed up with men who go around jumping in front of bullets just for kicks.”

“That’s so sweet,” Thea said with an exaggerated grin.

“Especially you,” Lance said, pointing a stern finger in her direction. “You’ve caused me too many gray hairs as it is!”

“Looks good on you though,” Thea said popping a noodle in her mouth. “Makes you look distinguished.”

“I’ll show you distinguished,” he snorted. “Anyway, like I said, no offense.”

“No offense taken, sir,” Tim told him as he reached for some spring rolls.

Lance turned to Diggle, hitching his thumb towards Tim, “I like this kid; he’s got manners. We should keep him and ship these two over to Gotham.” He gestured between the two youngest members of the team, “Between Baby Arrow and Speedy here, I don’t know which one of them is the biggest pain in my ass.”

“Baby Arrow? Dude, that is so what I’m calling you from now on,” Tim snickered at Roy causing the other man to glower in his direction.

“I’m down with that,” Dig told him. “I’m so sick of playing nursemaid to that one over there it isn’t even funny,” he said, nodding his chin toward Roy.

“Hey!” Roy said with a frown,

“Can’t be worse than this one,” Lance said, gesturing towards Thea. “Every time she sneaks out in that little outfit of hers it about gives me another heart attack.”

“You and Oliver both,” Dig said with a snort as he reached for the plates and offered one to Barbara.

“You know you love me,” Thea said with a mock pout causing Lance to chuckle and pat her head fondly.

“Sure I do, sweetheart.” He sat on the leather couch next to Roy and picked up a carton and began to pick through it, “So what’s going on with Team Arrow today? And where’s my daughter? Did she follow Oliver back to Gotham to collect our girl or to knock him over the head if he gets out of line?”

“Not quite,” Dig said in low tones.

“Yeah, you missed the royal shit-storm that happened in the Lair this morning,” Roy smirked.

“Hey! Watch it!” Lance said, cuffing the back of the younger man’s head and gesturing towards Barbara, “There happens to be ladies present.”
“Where?” Roy snorted.

“Careful there, Arrow Junior,” Barbara said as she wheeled her chair over to the food to load her own plate. “Don’t let the chair fool you; Mirakuru or not, I’ve been in the game since you were in diapers and I can still kick your ass up, down, and sideways.”

“A woman after my own heart,” Lance grinned at her. “Where have you been all my life, gorgeous?”

“Stuck in a cave, mostly,” she told him smartly.

“Well, let me tell you, Red; wherever you’ve been hiding I can already say that I’m in love,” he said winking at her.

Barbara smiled broadly, and glanced up at Diggle, “I really, really like Starling; the men here are so much nicer and better looking than back home.”

“Hey, I happen to be freaking gorgeous, thank you,” Tim told her.

“Compared to what?” Roy asked him dubiously.

“So what’s been going on with my girl and why exactly is she chasing after Oliver?” He asked Diggle as the man grabbed a box and took his place on the arm of the couch.

Dig proceeded to fill him in on that morning’s events as well as the revelations that Felicity had been running her own op and Sara being called away to a mission in Siberia by the Stellmoor group. Occasionally someone would break in with a comment or two while Lance merely sat quietly, listening intently without asking questions until they were done.

He rubbed his chin contemplatively, “Siberia, huh? Isn’t that where that Isabel is from? Felicity used to call her the Siberian Suck-a-trix when she got really worked up over her nonsense at the office.”

“I think so,” Dig said with a frown. “Think there’s a connection?”

“Could be, I don’t know,” Lance said as though filing it away. “Sara can pretty much handle herself though; it’s Slick I’m worried about. I don’t like the idea of Felicity being anywhere near that place without Sara there to have her back.”

“Our girl can handle herself in a fight,” Dig reminded him.

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it,” Lance told him. “Makes me twitchy just thinking about her being in there without backup. I’ve kind of gotten used to being her battle buddy, you know?” He sighed and rubbed his hand over his mouth before resting his elbows on his knees and looking around at the group, “So you guys are all heading up Friday if they don’t get this thing wrapped up before then, right?”

“That’s the plan, anyway,” Barbara said, digging though the now nearly empty cartons for some broccoli.

“I’ve got plenty of vacation time and personal leave racked up. That’s the beauty of line-of-duty injuries; they don’t count against your use it or lose it time and the clock automatically resets so I have about three years’ worth of vacation, sick leave, and personal days to spare,” Lance said musingly. “I’ll go ahead and put in for a few weeks when I get to the station and head up there with you guys.”
“You’re coming to Gotham with us?” Tim asked in surprise.

“Of course,” he said with a snort. “Sara’s my daughter and Slick practically is; I gotta be there for my girls. ‘Sides, somebody’s got to help Dig knock heads if we’re going to be babysitting the rest of you kids.”

“God knows I can use the help,” Diggle snorted in solidarity.

“You both realize that we’re not four, right?” Thea shot back.

“You do realize that I’m wearing underwear older than you are, right?” Lance told her.

“Ew,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

“I’ve washed them since then,” he grinned at her then ducked as she tossed a noodle at him. “Hey, watch it!”

“Why do you call Baby, ‘Slick’?” Tim asked curiously.

“Why do you call Felicity ‘Baby’?” Roy shot back. “You guys never did answer that one.”

Before Tim could answer, Lance did for him, “When Felicity was little her sister thought she was the doll she’d been asking their dad to get for her so she started calling her ‘Baby’ and it stuck.”

Everyone turned to him in surprise. “Felicity told you about her family?” Dig asked.

“Of course she did,” Lance scoffed. “Not the Batman stuff, but everything else. I mean, I might not have known her as long as you guys but I’d like to think we’re friends and, unlike you guys, we actually have the occasional conversation that doesn’t revolve around all this Arrow crap.”

“But why--? I talk to her about other stuff. I mean, why would she tell you that stuff and not us?” Roy asked in a hurt tone.

“Maybe because I asked her, Genius,” the older detective said sarcastically. Thea snickered nastily while Roy and Diggle had the decency to look somewhat embarrassed. Lance sighed, “Look, don’t take it personally; you guys don’t exactly sit around indulging in idle conversation. If you aren’t talking about a case or lunch, you tend not to talk at all. Besides, Felicity is around the same age as my girls so I tend to treat her like I would Sara or Laurel which means I tend to be a little nosy. I ask all the personal questions you guys never even think to ask like, ‘did you have a life before you got mixed up with a bunch of crazy people who wear masks and jump off of rooftops?’.” He then turned to Tim and Barb, “As for why I call Felicity ‘Slick’, it’s because she reminds me of my first partner, Anna Montoya, from back when I started out in Metropolis. Anna, or ‘Slick’, was one of the first women to make Captain in the department and, not only was she a helluva good cop, but she was an expert marksman to boot. I mean, she was this petite little thing, just like Felicity, but she could out shoot and out think most of the guys on the Force. I figured it suited her.” He sighed, “Anna would have loved Felicity, let me tell you.”

“What happened to her?” Barbara asked.

“Breast cancer, almost fifteen years ago,” he said a bit regretfully. “She has a daughter on the Force though; Renee. I think she lives down in you guy’s neck of the woods. I keep telling Felicity that she should think about going through the Academy herself. She’d own the Cyber-Crimes Taskforce within a week, plus she can think on her feet, has good instincts, and is pretty handy with a weapon. I’m telling you, that girl missed her true calling. She was born to be a cop.”
“Felicity told us that she was pretty handy with a gun and that you and Dig were the ones who trained her,” Tim said with a note of disapproval.

“What of it?” Lance said with a hint of challenge.

Tim shrugged slightly, “It’s just, don’t you think that’s a bit reckless; putting a gun in her hand like that? I mean, I get the self-defense stuff, fine, but guns?”

Lance let out a humorless bark of laughter, “Kid, Felicity is a better shot than most of the guys I’ve seen coming out of the Academy, right Dig?”

“Damn straight,” Diggle said immediately. “I’d put my money on her against just about any other unit’s SDM any day. She’s at least at expert Marksman class now and she could easily go all the way to Master class if she ever decided to start shooting competitively.”

“Besides, we weren’t training her on how to survive a mugging,” Lance said sternly. “This might be the land of sunshine and movie stars, but we aren’t playing bullshit kiddie games down here. Starling City might not have the same rep as Gotham does, but we got gangs, drugs, thugs, and all kinds of killers roaming our streets and that’s on a good day so don’t come lookin’ for me to apologize for teaching that girl what she needed to know to stay alive.”

“And what happens if someday she actually has to use it?” Tim asked, not backing down. “Do you honestly think Felicity could handle it if she had to shoot somebody?”

“She handled it fine,” Lance told him firmly.

The room went deathly quiet.

“So, when Thea said Baby took down Slade…?” Barbara said slowly.

“No,” Lance said shaking his head. “She didn’t shoot Slade, but she did have to use my service pistol to get to him before he could get away with a weapon that would have taken out most of the city.”

“What happened that night?” Tim asked, his frustration coming through in his tone. “I asked, but Felicity won’t talk about it.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Lance said, shifting in his seat slightly. “I offered to listen any time she wanted to talk about it but she never did. I kept reminding her that if she was on the Force they’d make her see a shrink after a line of duty shooting but she waved it off; said she was fine. ‘Course, I didn’t believe her, but what could I do?’ He snorted, “Personally, I blame these guys,” he said, hitching his thumb towards Diggle and Roy. “Team Arrow here brings stoicism to a whole other level. They’re a bad influence if you ask me. They go around treating bullet wounds like they’re something you can just slap a Band-Aid on and keep moving; introspection isn’t exactly high on their list of priorities.”

“Hey, Felicity knows she can talk to me,” Roy said defensively.

“Right, kid,” Lance said with a wry look. “You can barely even get your girlfriend here to give you the time of day after you took off with that little French girl in the weird ninja getup and cat mask.”

“I’m not his girlfriend anymore,” Thea said firmly.

“I rest my case,” Lance said with a smirk.
“When are you guys going to drop that already?” Roy scowled.

“Never,” Thea told him bluntly causing him to sigh in aggravation.

“She still could have come to us,” he grumbled.

“No, he’s right,” Dig said, his elbows resting on his knees as he leaned forward, one hand rubbing the back of his neck as he looked up with a guilty expression, “I knew I should have pressed her to talk it out but I didn’t. I guess none of us wanted to talk about it,” he said, dropping his eyes to the floor with a sigh.

“I tried asking once but she changed the subject,” Thea said with a shrug. “Then again, like you said, none of you ever talked about it either. I mean, technically I’m part of the team now and even I don’t know what went on after the coms cut out.”

“I don’t even know,” Roy said from his place on the couch. “I was kind of dead for most of it, remember? All I can remember is Slade punching me into hamburger meat before waking up to hear Oliver screaming her name right before the explosion. After that it’s mostly just a blur.”


Barbara narrowed her eyes at them, “Wait; so none of you have ever discussed it? Not even with each other?”

“Like I said, sweetheart; these guys don’t spend a whole lot of time on conversation and navel-gazing,” Lance said dryly.

“So what did happen?” Tim asked.

“You have to ask them for most of it; I only know what happened from the time Felicity called me in and we went up to the military base where Slade was holed up in order to pull these guys’ fat out of the fire,” Lance told him. “After that, I can tell you some of it but not all because I was too far away to hear what was going on before Felicity set off the charges and blew everything to hell and back.”

“Felicity blew Slade up; that’s how she took him out?” Tim exclaimed incredulously.

“She blew that son of a bitch all to hell and back,” Lance said with grim satisfaction. “I was washing little bits of that asshole out of my hair for a week.”

“Okay, so what happened?” Barbara said with a scowl. “And start from the beginning.”

“Dig, you want to take this?” Lance said, turning to look at the other man.

Diggle ran his hand over his head and sat up, his lips tightening as he thought back to that day, “It all started when Oliver was called in to meet with Waller…”

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When Diggle walked into the Lair that evening, the first person he saw was Sara leaning against the steel gurney in their medbay, her head down and her expression almost frightening in its intensity.

He’d only seen her look like that once before and the fact that she wore it now was enough to make
his stomach clench with dread.

“Sara?” He said, looking from her to an equally stony faced Oliver. “What’s going on? What are you doing back in town?”

“Yeah, and what’s with the top secret meeting?” Roy asked from behind him, oblivious to the tension in the room as they both made their way down the stairs. “As if Thea wasn’t already pissed as me, I had to ditch her to get over here.”

“You didn’t tell her about this, did you?” Oliver asked sharply.

“No,” Roy said, looking at him askance, suddenly realizing something was up. “You told me not to; why? What’s going on?”

“Slade’s back,” Oliver said in low tones, not looking at any of them.

“Shit,” Dig cursed faintly under his breath. The minute he saw their faces he knew. He’d seen these two people scared, he’d seen them angry, but only one man could affect them both like this. Not even Merlyn had the ability to do that.

He looked between them and watched as the humanity drained from their eyes and transformed itself into a visceral rage that had his hair standing on end.

“Fuck!” Roy bit out angrily, his hands clenched at his sides as he began to pace in agitation. “Son of a bitch!”

“There’s more,” Sara interjected.

“What?” Diggle asked them.

“Merlyn is with him,” Oliver said, his face obscured by shadows. “He sprung him out of containment on Lian Yu and, according to ARGUS, they’re holed up at an abandoned military base about three hundred miles from here with a WMD in their possession.”

“Yeah, because what would Slade’s homecoming be without a few fireworks, right?” Sara said in a deadpan.

“When the fuck did this happen?” Roy burst out. “ARGUS was supposed to be watching this guy and Merlyn just springs him? And how the hell did he already get hold of a bomb much less get back here this fast?”

Oliver’s hands balled into fists, “Apparently this happened three weeks ago.”

Roy gaped at him, “Three weeks? The fuck…!”

“Where’s Felicity?” Diggle asked looking around in concern.

“She’s fine,” Oliver said, his eyes meeting his partner’s at last.

“Ollie had me call her to make sure,” Sara said tightly, still leaning against the gurney.

He nodded, “And if we want her to stay that way then she can’t know about this.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Roy asked.

“And why the hell didn’t Waller inform us of this sooner?” Diggle asked darkly.
“We have reason to believe that Slade is targeting her specifically,” Oliver told them then reached behind him for the large sketchbook that had been sitting on Felicity’s workstation. He handed it to Diggle before speaking again, “He apparently fixated on her after she injected him with the Mirakuru cure for some reason. He’s been…” he paused, his jaw clenching, “drawing her obsessively for months, fantasizing about her in the same way he did with Shado.”

Diggle flipped through the pages of the book, his expression growing darker with each turn of the page as Roy stood behind him, looking over his shoulder with an air of repugnance.

“So in addition to being a psycho, this guy’s a total perv, too?” Roy said, taking the book from Diggle and tossing it in the trash can near the desk.

“Don’t leave that there,” Oliver told him sharply. “I don’t want Felicity to see it.”

Roy bent down and reluctantly fished it out of the trash, “What do you want me to do with it?”

Oliver rubbed his hand over his mouth before answering, “Take it into the alley and burn it after we’re done in here. I don’t ever want her seeing those pictures, understood?”

“Yeah, okay,” he nodded. “Got it.”

“You okay?” Diggle asked him in low tones as Oliver rubbed his fingers over his furrowed brow as though pained.

“No,” he said darkly. “If I had known that any of this could happen, that Waller would be stupid enough to-- damn it!” He cursed and began to pace, “I should have just killed him. I shouldn’t have let Felicity talk me into letting him live and now that son of a bitch is going to come after her if we don’t put him down for good!”

Sara pushed away from the gurney and walked over to Felicity’s chair, placing her hand on it as she stood there. “I could call Nyssa. She likes Felicity and the League is still gunning for Merlyn and Slade; I’m sure she’d help if I--”

“No,” Oliver said firmly, stopping midstride.

“She can’t get here in time but I could send Thea and Felicity to her; she could keep them safe,” Sara continued as if he hadn’t spoken.

“I am not sending my sister to the League of Assassins,” Oliver said irately.

“Fine,” Sara said coldly, turning her icy blue eyes towards him. “She’s Merlyn’s daughter so, who knows, he might spare her life. It didn’t work out for Tommy, mind you, but that’s your decision, not mine.”

“That’s right; it is,” his eyes sparked with annoyance but she didn’t back down.

“Felicity however...”

“Neither of them are going anywhere near the League and that’s final!” Oliver told her sharply.

“No, it’s not!” Sara threw back. “You want to risk Thea’s life then that’s on you, but you don’t get to do that with Felicity! Not with Slade; not again, and not with shit like this!” She pointed at the pad still clenched in Roy’s hand. “You don’t get to call the shots here, Ollie! If he gets hold of her because you decided to get all territorial, I swear to fucking Christ--!”
He turned on her, his expression tense, “She’s my responsibility, Sara, just like Thea is and this matter is not up for debate!”

“Bullshit!” She shot back aggressively.

He rounded on her, “Felicity and Thea are my business, Sara—not yours!”

“Of the two of us I’m the only one who apparently gives a shit about her so I’d say that makes her my business, wouldn’t you?” Sara said viciously.

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” Oliver said in a dangerous tone.

“Oh really?” Sara asked him, her eyes hard and accusing. “I’m not the one who handed her to Slade on a silver platter the last time, Oliver; that was on you! I also didn’t hand Slade over to Waller knowing that she’d eventually try to put him in her little Suicide Squad! If it was up to me he’d be dead and she wouldn’t be on his radar to begin with!”

The Lair went completely silent as the two of them locked gazes on one another, both of them wearing nearly identical expressions of anger mixed with fear and bone-deep remorse.

Sara was the first to crack, “I’m sorry,” she said, dropping her gaze. “I didn’t mean it. I shouldn’t have let my emotions get away from me like that but she’s one of the few people I’ve ever let get that close and she opened her home to me when Laurel kicked me out so…”

“No, you were right,” Oliver said tersely, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides as his eyes grew shadowed and solemn. “This is my fault; I shouldn’t have used her to get the anti-serum into him. Anything could have happened and now…”

“Stop—both of you,” Diggle said irritably. “You two tearing at each other’s throats isn’t helping anyone!” He turned to Oliver, ignoring Sara for the moment, “You did what you had to do and it worked. Felicity knew the plan; hell, she came up with the plan! Slade was insane before any of that happened; no one could have predicted he’d react to her like this. It’s not your fault.” He paused, his mouth twisting into a grimace, “What I can’t figure out though is why Waller didn’t tell us about this; any of it?”

“Yeah, and didn’t she try to ‘recruit’ her a few weeks ago?” Roy asked, finally breaking the silence as he bounced the sketchpad in his hand agitatedly. “You said Merlyn sprang him three weeks ago, right? That would be right around the time we got your kid back. You didn’t call Waller until after that so Slade was already out when she was trying to get Felicity to join ARGUS.”

“Exactly,” Dig nodded. “She even got a little aggressive with her; hinted to her that if she didn’t consider her offer carefully that ARGUS was going to make shutting down our mission here a priority until you stepped in and told her to back off.”

“Exactly,” Dig nodded. “She even got a little aggressive with her; hinted to her that if she didn’t consider her offer carefully that ARGUS was going to make shutting down our mission here a priority until you stepped in and told her to back off.”

“That’s why she was recruiting her,” Sara told them, her cheeks flushed with anger. “She was trying to figure out a way to keep Slade in line so she could integrate him into her Suicide Squad. When he escaped she figured she could use Felicity as bait to lure him back in but backed off when Oliver called her bluff.”

“But how was that supposed to work even if Felicity did go for it? There’s no way she would have ever gone anywhere near that guy; job or no job,” Roy said in confusion.

“I don’t think it would have been her choice to make once Felicity was behind ARGUS doors,” Oliver said in a dangerous growl.
“What do you—?” Roy stopped and looked down at the sketch pad Dig had handed him. As soon as what Oliver was implying hit him, a look of revulsion came over him and he tossed it back on the desk.

“I always knew Amanda was a stone cold bitch, but this is low even for her,” Diggle said in a mixture of anger and disgust.

“Amanda fucked up and she was desperate to get Slade back so she could cover her own ass,” Oliver said with barely repressed ire. “When I challenged her, she backed down because she didn’t want to tip me or Oversight off until she had time to regroup. If Felicity had fallen for it, she would have handed her to Slade with a pink bow on top as long as he agreed to play nice.”

“I don’t get it,” Roy said angrily. “ARGUS is supposed to be the good guys, right? How could she even think of using Felicity like that?”

“As soon as we’re done with Slade and Merlyn, I say we make taking Amanda Waller down a top priority,” Sara said in agreement.

“Amanda is no longer a problem,” Oliver told them.

“You took out the Director of ARGUS?” Dig asked, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. “While I’m not exactly going to cry over it, starting a war with ARGUS right now on top of having to deal with Slade and Merlyn isn’t exactly the smartest decision you could’ve made.”

“I didn’t take Amanda out; she’s alive and well—unfortunately,” Oliver answered in a low growl. “She’s been replaced as Director, unofficially at least, by a guy named Colonel Steve Trevor. He wants us to meet him tonight before we take on Slade and Merlyn. He and the Suicide Squad are going to be acting as clean up.”

“Clean up?” Dig asked, his eyes narrowing slightly. “They aren’t going in on this?”

“No,” Oliver said grimly. “In addition to a laundry list of other sins, Amanda allowed a dangerous piece of tech to slip out of ARGUS’s hands and into Merlyn’s. ARGUS can’t officially go anywhere near this mission as a result, so we need to take out Slade and Merlyn and destroy the device on our own. The Suicide Squad is there purely as a last resort. If we fail in our part, they’ll come in and finish it.” He looked around at them, “I have to warn you, there is no exit strategy on this thing and it’s probably going to be a one way ticket for anyone who joins me. I don’t expect any of you to say yes, and I’m not going to ask. In fact, I’m telling you not to. Trevor and some of his guys already volunteered to take your places. I’m just letting you know what’s happening so you have the heads up if we fail. I’ll need all of you to scatter; get your families and get as far away from Starling as you can and take Felicity and Thea with you.” He looked down at the floor for a moment as if to gather his thoughts, “You won’t have to worry about money. I have several off-shore accounts already set up. I talked to my lawyers after I found out about Connor and everything has been taken care of in regards to QC and my public holdings, but Felicity knows how to access the ARGUS accounts and my Arrow funds and can get you new identities—”

“Oh just shut the hell up, Ollie,” Sara told him with a rude snort. “Of course we’re coming along for the ride.”

“Are you sure?” Oliver asked, meeting her eyes.

She nodded, “But this time we end this; once and for all. He dies or we die,” she told him bluntly. “No mercy, no hesitation, we don’t stop until his head leaves his shoulders; I don’t want him ever coming back after this, understood? Merlyn, too.”
“Agreed,” he replied in the low voice of the man he’d left behind when he vowed to stop killing.

Diggle couldn’t blame him; this was Slade, which meant all bets were off.

“I’m in,” Roy said off-handedly although his eyes were dark with anger. “You’ve got to die of something, right? Besides, I owe both those motherfuckers some payback. There’s no way I’m standing on the sidelines for this one.”

“Goddamn it,” Dig sighed and ran his hand over his mouth in frustration, “I’m in, too.”

“Dig,” Oliver began, “you should stay behind, take care of Felicity and Thea; use some of your contacts to get them out of the country and keep them safe…”

“Like Sara said, just shut the fuck up, Oliver; I’m in, period,” he told him firmly. “You and I started this together and we’ll end it together, okay?”

“Thank you,” Oliver said with a nod.

“Like I was going to let your dumb ass go out there all by yourself? Please,” Dig said wryly. “Now what about Thea and Felicity? How are we going to keep them safe after we leave?”

Oliver turned and walked over to Felicity’s workstation before answering, “Trevor promised to keep them safe but I’m not overly fond of letting ARGUS anywhere near them even if this guy does seem like he’s on the up and up.”

“Let me call Nyssa,” Sara interjected again.

“Sara…” Oliver breathed out, shaking his head.

“She can make sure Felicity knows to get Thea and go underground and can provide them with everything they need,” she told him. “I trust her, Ollie.”

“Nyssa; the same chick who kidnapped and poisoned your mom and Laurel a while back?” Roy said sarcastically.

“She won’t hurt Felicity or Thea,” she said confidently. “Like I said, she likes her. In fact, when I told her why I had to leave she let me go with her blessings and told me to do whatever I had to do to keep Felicity safe.”

“But why?” Dig asked with a frown. “Why would she say that when she’s only met her once; that I know of anyway.”

Sara turned to him, “I don’t know; Felicity made an impression on her for some reason. Personally I think it’s because she knows how much she means to me.” She looked pleadingly towards Oliver again, “Please Ollie; let me do this for her and for your sister.”

“We could call Barry,” Dig suggested when he noticed Oliver hesitate. “They could stay with him in Central City; hole up there until they can get out of the country.”

“What about Felicity’s family?” Roy cut in. “Didn’t she say something about Vegas once? You could send them there?”

Oliver shook his head, “Central City’s not far enough and I’m not even sure Felicity has any family. She said something about her mother being from there once, but that’s all I know. Besides, if we send them to any known family or associates Slade will find them in no time.” He scowled, “Fine,
call Nyssa, but I don’t want her coming down here. Just tell her to pass the message on if you don’t check in with her by midnight and that’s it. Felicity knows to take Thea and run; the less they have to do with the League the better.”

“Got it,” Sara nodded.

“I mean it, Sara,” Oliver told her, his expression intense. “No League involvement, understood?”

“I’ll let her know,” she readily agreed. "What about Laurel and dad?"

"Keep them out of the loop," Oliver told her. "ARGUS thinks they're low priority targets and I'm willing to agree with that assessment. If we fail, Trevor said he'd notify them and offer them protection."

"Laurel's going to be pissed that you left her out of this," Diggle warned him, one eye on Sara to gauge her reaction as well. "Technically she's a member of the team still."

"She'd be a distraction," the other man said bluntly. "Besides, we don't need to give Slade or Merlyn any more targets to use against us."

"He's right," Sara said with a nod of agreement. "Laurel's good but street thugs are one thing and this is something else entirely; she's never had to deal with anything this big before as an operator. Plus if she finds out we intend to go in hot she might try to break ranks and we can't be arguing among ourselves when we're hip deep in super-soldiers and weapons of mass destruction."

"I agree," Diggle nodded. "Roy?"

"The fewer the better," the other man nodded, his expression betraying a hint of surprise as he realized he was being treated as a voting member of the team. Oliver must have caught it because he spoke up, "Roy, I know things have been strained between us but I need us to be on the same page when we go out there. I need you to follow my lead and leave the bad blood behind, got it?"

The younger man nodded, "Yeah; I mean, you and I still have some things to work out but..." he grimaced. "Look, I'm in and that means following orders, okay? I'm not going to cause any shit or bail on you, I swear."

"I didn't think you would," Oliver said quietly holding out his hand in a gesture of peace. Roy took it and a look of understanding passed between them, "I've got your back, Oliver."

"Thanks," he nodded in return.

Diggle shifted uncomfortably, “Now that that’s settled, you said they had a WMD; are we talking nuke, another Markov device, or what?"

“No, it’s something they called the Omega Device…”

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“Wait,” Barbara cut in sharply. “Did you say the Omega Device?”
“Son of a bitch!” Tim burst out. “So that’s where it went; ARGUS had it?”

“You know what it is?” Diggle asked with a frown.

“Oh yeah,” Barbara said roundly. “Bruce was tracking that guy we told you about yesterday, the Black Mask, and they got into a tussle near the device. He fell against it and something happened. He and the device both just vanished. He was gone for almost five months before he turned up in an alley about six blocks from Arkham Asylum with some powerful sedatives in his system and no idea of how he’d gotten there or where he’d been all that time. We tried tracking the device but it never turned up again.”

“I don’t remember anything in the news about Wayne being missing for five months,” Lance said pointedly.

“We thought Bruce had been killed but I didn’t want to have him declared dead until we knew for sure what happened so we covered it up,” Tim said in a tight voice. “We spread the rumor that he was traveling and Dick took over as Batman while I handled things at Wayne Enterprises until he came back.” His jaw clenched in anger, “So ARGUS had the machine?” He asked. “Were they the ones keeping Bruce all that time?”

“It would explain the drugs in his system and the memory loss,” Barbara said with a hard look. “Waller probably had him retconned.” She made a noise of frustration, “Goddamn it! I hacked into ARGUS a hundred times and never found anything about the Omega Device or about them having Bruce in their custody!” She grimaced, “By God, if I ever get my hands on that bitch, I swear…!”

“Get in line,” Tim said grimly. “When Bruce finds out he’s going to go straight for her throat with me and Dick right behind him.”

Dig shook his head, “I don’t know anything about that; Oliver never mentioned Wayne or that Amanda had him in detention. I don’t even know if he knows about your team’s involvement with this. In fact, I seriously doubt he does since he would have mentioned it a lot sooner and probably would have made contact with Batman when we went after the device. Despite what you may think, if he knew you guys had a stake in this fight and could help our cause, he would have reached out. Trevor told him this device was capable of taking out ten square miles with just the flip of a switch and that we needed to destroy it. He wouldn’t have risked taking that on alone if he thought there was a possibility that you guys might agree to back us up.”

“Yeah,” Roy said quickly. “I think he even tried to get in touch with the Flash but he couldn’t get a message to him on time and he really hates asking that guy for anything ever since he and Felicity--”

“They’ve got it, Roy,” Diggle said dryly, cutting him off.

“If you guys had reached out we would have been there,” Tim told them. “In fact, if Bruce had found out about all of this, especially the part about Deathstroke coming for Baby…” He shook his head ruefully. “Anyway, how did she wind up going after Deathstroke to begin with? From what you said, it sounds like you guys covered your tracks fairly well; how did she figure out your plan? Did Nyssa tell her?”

“According to Sara it wasn’t Nyssa. No one ever figured out how she knew and, frankly, I never asked and I doubt Oliver ever thought to,” Dig said with a shrug. “I mean, how does Felicity do half the stuff she does?”

“Don’t look at me,” Roy said. “I didn’t say a word. In fact, I never even spoke to her that day and Oliver made us leave our cell phones behind so she couldn’t track us just in case she did figure
“I think someone knows what went down, right Chickie?” Barbara said, noticing Thea’s exaggerated eye roll.

“The alley,” Thea said with a smirk.

“What?” Roy asked in confusion.

She sighed, “It’s my club, Roy; I keep a security setup in my office.” At his blank look she grimaced. “God, I can’t believe I ever dated someone who could be this thick; seriously. The alley! I was going through the security feeds when I got in that night and I watched you burning something in the alley in the middle of the afternoon during a record-breaking heat wave; it kind of caught my attention,” she said sarcastically. “Plus you totally blew me off after swearing up and down that you wanted to explain that whole thing with you and that slut, Jade—Cheshire—whatever the heck she called herself, so after you guys left I went into the alley to investigate,” she shrugged. “I couldn’t find anything so I called Felicity and asked her to help. I figured you were hiding something so she went back over the feeds and found out about Slade and where you guys were going.”

“Wait, feeds?” Roy asked, his eyes swinging over to Thea in consternation.

“Yeah, the whole place is wired. Doh,” Thea said, rolling her eyes again. “I can’t believe you guys didn’t know that.”

“Felicity bugged the Foundry?” Roy gaped at her. “Since when?”

“Since always,” Thea told him.

“Why would Felicity bug the Lair?” Diggle asked, equally put out.

“Um, how many times have people broken into this place again?” Diggle and Roy both flinched as Thea grinned triumphantly. “Right.” She turned to Roy, “Which is, by the way, but one of the many reasons I wouldn’t do it with you when you tried those lame ass moves on me last month…besides the fact that I didn’t want to catch whatever variety of Feline STD you caught from the Cat-Slut,” she said snarkily, “I so did not want to have to hear about it from Felicity. You should have heard her whenever Sara and Oliver would get down and dirty during one of their private ‘sparring matches’ after she had to scrub the feeds. Also, and more importantly, you screwed a crazy Alice in Wonderland obsessed French whore with a Freddy Krueger manicure who tried to fucking stab me so, no; no nookie for you--ever again.”

“I apologized and, besides, we were technically on a break at the time” Roy muttered.

“She tried to stab me and then you slept with her,” Thea said in emphasis, “after she tried to *stab me*.”

“Yeah bro, there’s like no coming back from that one,” Tim said, shaking his head in sympathy. “Although I totally get the cat thing.”

“Again, thanks for the support, bro,” Roy said shooting him a dark look. He looked back to Thea, “So you got Felicity to spy on me for you?”

“No,” Thea said contemptuously. “I just told her something was fishy and asked her to come by early. We were planning on hanging out since it was her birthday anyway—not that any of you guys even remembered, by the way.” Again all of the men grimaced in embarrassment. “I told her I had been trying to call you, which I had been, and then I tried calling Ollie but no one was picking up so
she tracked your phones. After she found the weird texts from that Trevor dude, she played back the feeds and found out what you guys were planning and called in Detective Lance.”

“Wait; but we left our phones here,” Roy said with a frown.

“You guys did; Ollie didn’t,” she told him with an air of condescension.

“What do you mean?” Roy said in confusion, “I know he left his phone here; I saw him leave it.”

Diggle shut his eyes and hung his head in sudden realization, “No, he didn’t. Damn.”

“Yeah, he did,” Roy argued. “Both of them.”

Dig shook his head, “He left his personal cell and his Arrow cell, but he took one of the burner phones so Trevor could text him the coordinates, remember?”

“Exactly,” Thea nodded. “And since Felicity is the one who clones all your burner phones for your missions she was able to hack into it and get the information she needed to track you.”

“Shit.” Roy rubbed the bridge of his nose in defeat, “Why didn’t we think of that before? God, I feel so stupid.”

Dig sighed, “Because by the time it was all over with it really didn’t matter anymore.”

“See? Like I said before; these guys aren’t big on conversation,” Lance said dryly.

“I can’t believe you guys have never talked about any of this before,” Tim said with a frown.

“To be fair, Timmy; the Bat Boys aren’t that big on talking either,” Barbara pointed out. “If you didn’t have me as your middleman, you’d all be in the dark about what the others are up to.”

Tim threw her a begrudging look of concession, “Okay, fine. So Oliver tells you what’s going on, Roy burns the sketchpad in the alley then leaves with the others which gets Thea’s attention, then Felicity tracks you guys down and figures out what’s going on. What happened after that?”

“We get to the airfield near the base to meet with Trevor but Merlyn is already there with a bunch of Slade’s guys and they’re tearing through the Suicide Squad and everything they’ve got like it’s nothing,” Diggle continued. “Raven and Torque were both dead by the time we got there, Tiger was nearly dead, Deadshot and Trevor were still hanging in there but just barely. We immediately sprang into action to take out the mercs while Oliver went one on one with Merlyn. By the time the fight was over, Merlyn and the mercs were all down permanently and Trevor was still in good enough shape to patch up Tiger and Deadshot but there is no way he could help take on Slade and the rest of his guys with broken ribs, a bullet in his shoulder, and another in the thigh, so we left them behind, took the intel and the transport, and headed for the base on our own.”

He took a breath, his face lost in shadows of the past. “There we were, stuck driving in the middle of nowhere during a freak storm that we later found out was the worst tropical cyclone to hit the area since 1939. It was completely unprecedented because most storms like that usually hit the coastline later, around late-August or September, but this was late-July and we were inland. It shouldn’t have hit us like that, not out of nowhere; all I can figure is that it had something to do with that device they were messing with.”

“It was raining the night Bruce disappeared, too, and there was also that bad storm that hit just before we found him again,” Tim said thoughtfully.
Barbara nodded, “Worst Nor’easter Gotham had seen in decades.”

“Whatever it was, we’re talking gale force winds and torrential rainfall with almost zero visibility and no clue as to what we were in for,” Diggle told them. “We were wearing black tactical gear and had taken the coms off the dead mercs so we could blend in easier in case someone spotted us. At first, things were going good; we managed to split up and take out several of the mercs on the perimeter and work our way to the bunker. As soon as we got there though, Slade sprung his trap and we were flanked. We gave as good as we got, taking out most of his guys, but…” he shook his head, unable to continue.

“I went after Slade,” Roy said, taking up where Diggle left off. “Oliver told me to go for the Device, that it took precedence, and it was probably a bad call on my part, but Dig was down and so was Sara. They had both taken a few bullets and couldn’t do much to defend themselves. I don’t even know if Sara was conscious. Oliver was trying to take out the guys trying to take them out and Slade was heading right for him so, instead of going for the device, I went for Deathstroke. I knew that Oliver couldn’t handle him one on one, not and help the others, so I jumped him. We got into a tussle and I managed to land a few hits, but Slade was freaky strong even without the full dose of Mirakuru in his bloodstream and he basically pounded me into hamburger in no time. The last thing I remember clearly before passing out was Oliver taking on Slade. The next thing I knew I was waking up in the hospital and Felicity was standing there with a bunch of Mylar balloons asking if I wanted her to try feeding me some green Jell-O because both my arms were in casts and they had me in traction for my busted leg. The Doc said I nearly lost my right arm; probably would have if not for the remnants of Mirakuru left in my system. As it was, it was still months before I got out of PT and back into the Foundry again.”

“So you didn’t see Felicity?” Tim asked.

Roy shook his head but Diggle answered, “I did; I was the closest one to the action other than Oliver. I didn’t see much though because I was in and out from blood loss. I managed to take out a bunch of Slade’s soldiers with head shots until I got into a tussle with two of them at once. I was wearing a vest but they were using armor-piercing rounds so it slowed the bullets but didn’t stop them. One of them put two in my chest and the other got me in the leg, but I still managed to take them both down. I watched Oliver take on Slade,” he shook his head again and grimaced. “It was… bad. Slade was toying with him, taking him apart piece by piece. Oliver fell and Slade just pinned him to the ground by driving that damn sword of his through his shoulder. He was giving his little ‘I’m the villain’ speech and had picked up one of Oliver’s arrows to drive it through his skull when Felicity just showed up out of nowhere and stopped him in his tracks.”

“What do you mean she ‘showed up out of nowhere’?” Tim frowned.

Diggle exhaled sharply, “I don’t know; like I said, I was in and out of it.”

“Well what did you see?” Barbara asked.

Dig rubbed his hand over his mouth, “Like I told you, it was raining like you wouldn’t believe and I was losing blood fast, but…” he paused, “It was like she just appeared out of nowhere. One minute it was just Slade and Oliver, and the next minute she was standing between them and Slade was stumbling backwards with this look of surprise like he hadn’t noticed her either. They talked, but I was too far away to hear anything. There was too much wind and Oliver just kept screaming over and over again for Felicity to run. I was in and out of consciousness by then and the last thing I remember was the explosion then some hazy recollections of talking to her which, for all I know, could have just been a dream because I was down a few pints. I definitely remember waking up briefly in the chopper though and asking where she was before seeing Felicity next to my bed in the
hospital a couple of days later without a mark on her.” He leaned back, his expression thoughtful, “I 
still haven’t figured that one out yet. She didn’t even have so much as a bruise on her and yet, as far 
as I know, she was the closest to the explosion.” He paused, "I remember waking up to the sound of 
her voice; she was crying and I asked her if everybody was okay, something like that, but then I fell 
out again. I never saw her though, I just heard her crying. I looked but...it was...weird...” He shook 
his head, "Something about the whole thing just spooked me, something in the way she was talking, 
the tone she was using even though I can't really remember what she said, so when I woke up in the 
medevac, for some reason, I just knew that she was dead; like she was a ghost, or an angel or 
something.” He looked at all of them and grimaced, "Like I said, I was gone. I'd lost so much blood 
they were forced to transfuse a few pints into me before we ever got to the hospital.” He sighed, 
"Sara was in the gurney next to me and, once I was alert enough, I was able to ask them if the other 
blonde made it, but they said that they didn’t see another blonde woman and that, as far as they 
knw, the only other victims to survive besides us were all male. That’s when I lost consciousness 
again.”

“She couldn’t have just ‘appeared out of nowhere’,” Tim said, looking from Dig and Roy who were 
next to him before turning to Thea and Lance. “None of you saw what happened?”

“Don’t look at me,” Thea told him. “I was stuck on coms because Detective Lance and Felicity 
wouldn’t let me come and they went out just before they got to the base. I didn’t find out anything 
until Felicity called from the hospital. I dropped everything and rushed up there because everybody 
was in surgery and she didn’t know if Ollie was going to make it. I didn’t even pack a bag; we 
wound up getting a hotel room and fresh outfits and stuff from the Target next door.” She frowned, 
her expression taking on a contemplative cast, “You know, for a discount store the clothes weren’t 
all that bad. I was pleasantly surprised.”

“Well, there’s a silver lining for you,” Barbara said dryly. “Your team is blown up, shot all to hell 
and back, but at least you managed to discover the joys of discount clothes shopping.”

“So no one knows how she got there? Detective?” Tim asked in consternation.

“My turn, huh?” Lance said with a humorless upturn of his lips. “Okay, but I can’t tell you too much 
of what happened between her and Slade. I was too busy plantin’ the charges while Felicity kept him 
distracted, but I can tell you what led up to it.” He leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees 
and took a moment to gather his thoughts.

“You know, I always wondered how she brought you in but no one else was asking so I didn’t 
either,” Roy said.

He looked at the younger man, “What happened was I got a call from Felicity saying I needed to 
meet her at the Lair,” he smiled humorlessly. “I’d known that Queen was the Arrow for a couple of 
years but--”

“I knew it!” Dig said triumphantly. “Cough it up,” he demanded, looking to Roy.

“Shit,” the younger man cursed, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet and pulling out a bill 
before handing it over.

“How much you get off him?” Lance said dryly, looking on in amusement.

“Fifty bucks,” Roy said petulantly.

“Did Queen get in on the pool?” He asked Dig who grinned broadly in response, “How much you 
stand to make on that one?”
“A hell of a lot more than fifty bucks,” Dig snorted, pulling out his billfold and tucking the cash inside.

“Yeah, well, I hope you got the son of a bitch good because he completely ruined a perfectly good day with the whole ‘suicide mission field trip’ you guys pulled on us, lemme tell ya.”

“So how long did you know exactly?” Roy asked, eyeing Dig as he shoved his wallet back in his pocket, probably hoping to get back at least some of the tip money he’d lost in their wager.

He leaned back in the seat and stretched his back before speaking again, “I knew the big secret for a while, practically from day one really, but I definitely knew before whole earthquake machine deal.” Roy’s face fell and Dig chuckled at his expression. He shrugged, “Hell, what kind of shitty ass detective do you think I am, kid? I bust Queen for being the Hood, catch him in one suspicious situation after the other, then find out the Vigilante’s IT girl just happens to work for him at QC? Please.”

“So why didn’t you just tell Oliver you knew?” Tim asked curiously.

“Because I didn’t want to know and neither did he,” Lance answered gruffly. “I spent a lot of years hating him for ruining my life and the lives of my girls. When Sara came back…” he paused, “Well, I had to…reassess things a bit,” he admitted reluctantly. “I apologized to Oliver, but I still wasn’t ready to make peace with the Arrow: not at first,” he added quickly, “then later I figured that when he was ready for me to know then it should be his call to make. I didn’t want to take that away from him. Plus…” He took a deep breath and looked around the room, “Look, you all should know by now that every single one of you is a goddamn hero in my book, I’ve been in this with you too long to think otherwise, but I’m a cop; I’d like to think I’m a damn good cop, and tossing all the rules out the window to join forces with a bunch of costumed vigilantes was hard for me.”

He took a drink of his tea and set it back down on the table in front of him. “Vigilante justice,” he shook his head and grimaced, “it just went against everything I believed in; equability of justice, the police code, and the rule of law. Anything outside of that just smacked a little too close to the same mentality that was responsible for lynching’s and folks being dragged from their beds in the middle of the night to be beat on because someone just decided they needed to be taught a little ‘social justice’.” He looked around the room again, “Now, don’t get me wrong; you people do what’s necessary, I know that now, but it was still a lot to process, y’know? The badge, even now, it still means something to me even though I’m sitting down here in this basement with you. I earned my shield, fought for it, bled for it; I’ve fought scumbags both on the street and in my own precinct for years because I believed in what it stood for then and I still do now. I made a lot of enemies because of it, too. Being a vigilante, going along with what that entailed, with what Oliver had done as both the Hood and as the Arrow, it felt a little like I was giving all that up and it took a while for me to figure out where I really stood.”

“So how’d you get mixed up in all this stuff to begin with?” Barbara asked.

“That’s a long story,” Lance said with a chuckle. “You guys don’t want to hear all that.”

“Why not?” Tim asked, “I can kick Roy’s ass anytime,” Roy glared at him but he ignored it, “and we have to wait around to see what’s going on with Baby anyway so we might as well hear your whole origin story while we wait.”

“Are you serious?” Lance asked with a smirk.

“Yeah,” Thea said enthusiastically. “I wouldn’t mind hearing it myself.”
“Dig, you hearing this? The kids want me to tell them a bedtime story,” he laughed.

“Might as well tell them,” the other man shrugged. “You know they’re just going to bother the crap out of you until you do; especially that one,” he said toeing Thea’s chair playfully.

“I am pretty persistent,” Thea preened.

“My origin story,” he snorted then shook his head ruefully. “Alright, you asked for it…”
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Two

Lance was not the same man he’d been ten years ago. Ten years ago, before his youngest child got on a boat, he’d been a happier person. Oh, he was still a gruff son of a bitch at times, especially when he put on the badge and had to deal with scumbags, but outside of work he rarely had a reason not to smile. He was still a relatively young man then with a gorgeous wife whose ass made him sit up and pay attention, two smart, beautiful girls in college, a home, and a thriving career on the SCPD. There was even talk about him being promoted to Sergeant if he wanted it. He’d been considering it seriously in the weeks leading up to Sara’s disappearance; getting off the street and behind a desk. He loved being a detective but the girls were both in college, he was getting older, and he was starting to think it would be nice to have more of a regular schedule. He wanted to spend more time at home, build a backyard barbecue, travel a little, gain a few pounds by sitting on his ass and enjoying the game, and enjoy the second half of his life without having to risk it on the streets. He knew he’d never make Chief, he couldn’t stomach all the politics that came with that sort of position, but he could definitely see going as far as Lieutenant or Captain before he retired. It was a good life. He’d even go so far as to say he was somewhat happy-go-lucky back then.

At least it was a good life before Oliver Queen got on a boat and took his baby girl along for the ride. After that his whole world went to shit.

He’d never liked Oliver. No father likes the boy he knows is sleeping with his daughter, much less both of them, but he really didn’t like Oliver Queen. From the first day his daughter Laurel had come home on a cloud, all dreamy eyed and mooning over the little bastard, he’d hated that kid. Just hearing his name could disrupt his whole day. He brought chaos into his otherwise happy world.

How times changed yet stayed the same, he thought ruefully as he looked at the faces of these men and women, both new friends and old, that he now thought of as his second family. Not too long ago he would have arrested every damn one of them in a heartbeat but now…now he’d shed blood with them, tears with them; they’d given him back everything he’d ever lost and then some.

Oliver Queen still brought chaos to his world, but he also gave him the tools to fix it. He gave him the opportunity to right the wrongs that the law couldn’t fix. All of them, each one of these people along with Oliver had given him the power to help make a difference. They gave him back his purpose; the thing that made him want to be a cop to begin with.

“My origin story…” He mused. He looked off into the distant past, his mouth tightening as he
thought back to his days as a rookie, “Well, I guess I should start off by telling you that I first joined the force in Metropolis. In those days, the precinct—hell, the whole city was lousy with corrupt cops; so much so that they didn’t even bother hiding the fact that they were on the take. Bribes were so commonplace that they’d openly divvy up the day’s ‘profits’ in the locker room. The first time I turned down my ‘fair share’, some of my so-called Brothers in Blue accused me of being everything from an idealist to a rat, and my so-called partner, a fat pig bastard named Mulcahey, took me aside and told me I’d better get on the bandwagon or I might find out just how hard it can be for a cop on the streets alone.”

“Yeah, my dad can tell you about that,” Barbara said with an ironic smirk. “When he joined the Gotham PD, there were maybe a half dozen cops in the entire city he could trust, if that.”

“Jim Gordon?” Lance asked curiously.

She looked at him in surprise, “You know my dad?”

He shook his head, “Only by reputation. Your old man was a good cop; a legend really, especially with us back in the day. He cleaned a lot of house and, while Metropolis didn’t have the rep Gotham did, the cancer ran pretty deep. We used to look at him like he was our goddamn patron saint down in IA.”

“You were in Internal Affairs?” Dig asked in surprise. “I never knew that.”

“I don’t talk about it much,” he shrugged. “I started off as a beat cop but after a few days with Mulcahey, trailing behind him as he shook down drug pushers and pimps for cash; I was ready to hand in my badge and join my cousin in the plumber’s union, but I wanted to be a cop my whole life and I just couldn’t give that up. My dad was a cop, his dad was a cop; I wasn’t going to let a piece of shit like Mulcahey run me off. Cops like him were a disgrace to the uniform, so I went down to IA and that’s where I first met Anna. She took me under her wing, became my first real partner on the force, and the three of us: Anna, me, and another great cop by the name of Dan Turpin, cleaned house top to bottom.” He grinned, “Seeing Mulcahey being led out in handcuffs from the bullpen was one of the proudest moments of my career, let me tell you.”

“Why’d you leave Metropolis?” Thea asked, scooting Felicity’s office chair closer so she could hear better.

“I met Dinah and she was leaving to get her doctorate at SCU so she could be closer to her family so I followed her. Besides,” he shrugged, “IA burns you out quick and I wanted to be on the streets helping folks like my dad did. We were doing important work, don’t get me wrong, but it wasn’t what I wanted to do for the rest of my career. I couldn’t go back to the beat in Metropolis; people hear you worked IA and they don’t want to partner with you even if they aren’t doing anything wrong. Being on the ‘Rat Squad’ taints you, follows you, and Starling was a chance for a fresh start. We moved into this tiny little off-campus apartment together, I got on the SCPD and she got her doctorate, she became pregnant with Laurel, so we got married and built our lives here.”

“So is that what made you get involved with these guys and their mission? Your background in IA?” Tim asked.

“No exactly,” Quentin chuckled.

“Sara?” Barbara asked.

“Technically I was with these guys before Sara got back but she was part of it.” He turned to Barbara, “Does your old man know what you’re doing with Batman?”
“Pretty much,” Barbara admitted. “Actually, he’s part of his mission, too. In fact, he was the cop who investigated the murder of Bruce’s parents so you could say he was there from the very beginning although he’s not as ‘hands on’ as I am.”

He took a moment to consider that, “I don’t know, I guess maybe my days in IA were part of it. I never really thought about it before; I just kind of fell into this thing.”

“We all did,” Diggle said with a snort. “I thought I was just babysitting a rich pain in the ass and wound up becoming the partner to a masked vigilante.”

“I guess I got caught up in this because Oliver felt he owed me for Sara when, truth is, I’m the one who owed him,” Lance told them.

“How so?” Tim asked.

“I didn’t know it at the time but Oliver saved Sara’s life and he saved Laurel and me more than once. I hated Oliver for taking Sara from me but I began to see the good the Arrow, or rather, the Hood was doing. He could have picked any cop to become his contact but he picked me. Honestly, I sometimes think he wanted to get caught back then. He knew I suspected him but he kept calling me anyway whenever he needed something. I was convinced he was baiting me at first but then I started to see the work he was doing and realized it didn’t matter who the Arrow was; he was doing what needed to be done and I wanted to be part of that. That’s not to say that going from the guy whose job it was to put the Vigilante behind bars to becoming the Arrow’s unofficial police contact was an easy transition for me to make.”

He took another moment, leaning forward again to take another sip of his tea before speaking, “Even going through what I went through in Metropolis, I still loved being a cop. I was still the same man who believed that true justice could only come from the law and that, as a cop, it was my job to serve and protect by adhering to that system no matter what. After I thought I lost Sara though,” his expression darkened, “I lost that part of myself. Dinah refused to grieve; she was in denial and convinced Sara was alive. Turns out she was right but, at the time, well…” He let his voice trail off and grimaced, “We were fighting a lot because she kept going back and forth to China to find her, she was never home; it had gotten so bad that the university had to let her go because she was gone so much. Her parents had left her plenty of money so while it wasn’t a financial strain, the constant emotional roller coaster of watching her get her hopes up every time she found a new lead followed by the deep depressions she’d experience when it didn’t pan out was just too much to take after a while. She refused to accept that Sara was gone, so I had to grieve for both of us. I started drinking because I just couldn’t deal and my alcoholism was the final nail in the coffin; it wrecked our marriage. She left and I changed because of it.”

“I stopped being the good cop I set out to be and I became the kind of brutal son of a bitch I always hated. I threw all the rules out the window for a while,” he said with a look of self-revulsion. “I can honestly say I hated myself for a long time for that, but it didn’t stop me from working out my demons by bustin’ heads and skirting the rules when it suited me. When Oliver came back alone, I lost it,” he admitted, leaning back and running his hand over his newly shaven close cropped hair.

Ever since they shaved it down in the hospital six months ago to remove some shrapnel he’d taken to keeping it short. It was less trouble to deal with and, frankly, his hair was starting to thin a bit anyway.

“Hell, from the sounds of it, he practically ruined your life; you ask me you had a right to be pissed,” Roy said.

“Hey!” Thea glared.
“It’s true,” Roy shrugged.

“The Oliver who did that wasn’t the same Oliver who came back from the island,” Thea said in defense of her brother. “And even before the island I don’t think he ever meant to hurt anyone, I think he was just immature and kind of selfish. He might have been a little mixed up but he was never deliberately cruel; just…careless. Besides, he’s still my brother even if he was kind of a screw up.”

“I knew Oliver didn’t set out to hurt Sara even then,” Lance assured her. “I was so far in denial though that the truth didn’t matter. I was mad that Sara died and he was alive, simple as that, and blaming Oliver was easier than blaming myself or being angry at Sara for getting on that boat in the first place.”

“To be fair, I would have been pretty pissed myself after all that,” Barbara said dryly then met Thea’s chastising look with a raised brow. “Sorry Chickie, I’m on Lance’s side with the whole ‘grudge’ thing. The Oliver of today might be all that and a bag of chips but, from what I can tell, the Ollie of old needed a swift kick in the pants for some of the shit he pulled.”

“She’s not wrong,” Dig reminded her. “In fact, he still needs his ass kicked occasionally.”

“Okay, fine. You might have a point there,” Thea admitted reluctantly.

“So even though you had legitimate reasons for having a grudge against Oliver, you helped him anyway? Even after all that?” Tim asked with a frown.

He sighed, “Yeah, well, not at first. It took a while. Seeing him, knowing he lived and Sara didn’t, knowing in my gut that he was the Hood,” he tightened his lips, “I went after him with a vengeance and nearly ruined my career doing it but, as time passed, I found myself beginning to agree with what the man who’d destroyed my family was doing. By the time Sara came back, I was all in.”

“So you didn’t tell him you knew because you were still pissed?” Tim asked.

“No,” he paused, “Well, maybe at first, but when I got over that, my reasons for keeping it under wraps weren’t motivated by anger or resentment. I did it because it was the only way I had to make it up to him; all the hell I put him through when he first came back, not to mention all the shit I said to him. Oliver didn’t want me to know so, for him, for bringing back my girls, and to show penance for the sins I’d committed against him, I let him have his secret.”

“But that changed six months ago,” Tim said; it wasn’t a question but more of a statement.

“Had to,” he said with an ironic smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. “The rest of these jokers took off on a suicide mission without telling anybody and Felicity needed my help to go after them. She called me, took me down into the secret Arrow clubhouse, and that was that.”

“I already knew you knew,” Thea said with a wide grin. “When you walked down into the Lair with Felicity you didn’t even blink, like you’d been in here a million times before.”

“But you hadn’t been down here before…right?” Roy questioned.

“Once or twice,” Lance admitted with a smirk. “Sides, I wasn’t really hiding it from anybody but Oliver. Felicity and Sara both knew I knew, plus me and Dig here were spending so much time hanging out together at the range that some of the guys at the precinct thought we were dating.”

“You wish you were pretty enough to date me,” Dig snorted.
“Hey, I happen to be a hell of a catch,” Lance told him. “I can cook, I cut a mean rug, and I have it on good authority that I’m a hell of a kisser.”

“Yeah, well, I prefer dates with more hair on their heads and less on their faces,” the other man shot back.

Everyone laughed and Tim asked, “So she briefs you on what’s going on and then you guys just take off after them?”

“Pretty much,” Lance said. “They had between forty-five minutes to an hour’s head start on us and had taken a chopper to the airfield, but Felicity had the keys to the tactical van and I was able to abuse my position a little in order to break the speed limit and get us there posthaste.”

Tim nodded, “So what happened when you got there; what did you see?”

“The charred remains of the chopper they’d been in and a lot of dead bodies,” the detective said grimly. “And then we met the Colonel who filled us in on what we’d missed.”

“How is Turner doing?” Trevor asked, grunting in pain as Felicity finished wrapping his ribs. She’d already re-bandaged the shoulder wound and, as Lance watched her work with quiet efficiency, he had to wonder what it was that would draw a girl like Felicity into the kind of life where patching up broken ribs and bullet wounds had almost become second nature.

“Sorry,” she said softly before picking up the scissors to cut away his pants leg.

“It’s fine,” he assured her gently as he looked towards Lance who was checking the men.

“Alive,” he said, checking his pulse. “Don’t know how I feel about that though.”

“You’re all heart, Detective,” Deadshot grumbled as he touched the gash above his cybernetic eye-patch and winced. The former assassin grimaced and cupped his hand over the bandaged wound on his shoulder as the wind picked up and blew some of the rain that was pouring through one of the holes in the roof onto him. “Fucking hell, you could at least help me get out of the goddamn rain! Might as well be outside for all the shelter this rusted out shithole offers.”

“Suck it up, Lawton; a little rain never hurt anybody. Just be glad we’re bothering to patch you up at all,” Lance said, strapping on the tactical vest he found. “Far as I’m concerned, ARGUS or no ARGUS, you should be in a Federal Penn awaiting the death penalty for everything you and your little buddy here have done.”

“I understand where you’re coming from Detective but, I assure you, Lawton and the rest of the Squad have been trying to make up for their pasts by serving their country with honor,” Trevor said with a wince as Felicity worked on his leg.

“Yeah, well, it’s not like its voluntary though, is it?” Lance said with an edge of sarcasm. “Plantin’ a bomb in a killer’s spine and tellin’ him to do something or go boom doesn’t exactly make him a patriot, it just means that he doesn’t want to see his brains splattered all over the floor.”

“Hey, we came here voluntarily,” Lawton reminded him as he adjusted the wrapping on his shoulder with obvious discomfort. “I could’ve been in my nice dry cell reading a book instead of out here in the middle of whatever wet hell the Colonel dragged us to with a hole in my shoulder in order to save your team’s asses. Plus, in case you hadn’t noticed, Raven and Torque are dead so show a little goddamn respect.”
“Yeah, well, pardon me if I do all my cryin’ on the inside,” Lance told him gruffly.

“Where are Oliver and the others headed?” Felicity asked as she finished sewing up the hole in the other man’s leg.

The Colonel’s lips tightened as if reluctant to answer her, “Ms. Smoak, I should tell you that Queen wanted you kept out of the loop on this mission for a reason. Slade--”

“I already know all about Slade Wilson, Colonel,” she said, cutting him off, “but thanks for the heads up. Now where are they headed?”

He sighed in resignation, “There’s a decommissioned military base a little over thirty-two klicks north from here; that’s where Slade and the rest of his mercs are holed up. Arrow and his team left out around half an hour ago so they should already be there. Take my tablet in the case; it’s filled with all the intel I passed onto your team before they left.” He watched as Lance rooted through the messenger bag on the floor next to him. “Look, I’ll be honest, I don’t know how good this data is anymore,” he said to them breathlessly as he clutched his now wrapped broken ribs with one hand as Felicity applied a new pressure bandage and dressing to the gunshot wound in his thigh. “There’s a mole in ARGUS; someone close enough to me to be able to feed information regarding this operation to Merlyn and Slade. I’d say it was HIVE again but, as far as I know, they’ve gone dark.”

“Fuckin’ HIVE bastards,” Lawton spat. “I don’t like anybody messin’ with my brains. As soon as I find them I’m taking all those motherfuckers out.”

“Watch your mouth, Lawton,” Lance said, tipping his head towards Felicity.

“Sorry there, sweet cheeks,” Lawton grunted in apology.

“It’s okay,” she told him before turning back to Trevor. “Were your systems hacked?” Felicity asked as she stood up and accepted the tactical vest Lance held out for her and put it on over her now thoroughly soaked t-shirt.

He shook his head, “This was completely off-book which means it had to come directly from my inner circle.”

“Waller?” Lance suggested and at Trevor’s look of surprise he said, “I’ve heard Dig and Felicity mention her a few times; seems like the kind of move she’d be capable of if it suited her interests.”

“I doubt it,” Trevor said grimacing in pain as he adjusted in the chair. “She’s supposed to be under lock and key but anything’s possible. First HIVE infiltrates ARGUS then disappears without a trace, now this…frankly, I don’t know what the hell is going on but that’s not what’s concerning me most right now.” He took another pained breath, “As soon as Queen and his team left, I tried to get through in order to get some choppers in the air and call in the troops, but communications are down. If I don’t check in with my assistant soon, she’s going to call in an air strike to take out everything on that base.” He shifted again, straightening his leg with a grunt of pain, “Not only will your team be caught in the blast but it could trigger the device. The weather is going to hamper them a bit if it holds, but I figure that if I don’t check in within,” he checked his watch and grimaced, “the next hour or so, they’ll be wheels up by midnight. That gives you an hour and a half, maybe less before they get here in total. If you’re determined to do this then you need to get to that base, set the charges, and haul ass out of there.”

“We’d better get on the road then,” Lance said with an assertive nod as he handed Felicity the tablet then pocketed a pistol he’d collected off a corpse before grabbing one of the assault weapons and some ammo he’d taken from another dead mercenary and slinging it over his shoulder.
“Good luck,” Trevor said, nodding to them both. “Remember though; whether you plant the charges or not, you have to get there and get out within the next forty-five minutes, in order to give yourselves enough lead time to get out of the blast radius.”

“We’re not leaving until we get our team out,” Felicity told him.

“I get where you’re coming from, but unless I can get communications up and working…” He didn’t bother finishing the sentence.

“Understood,” Lance said then placed his arm around the younger woman to escort her to the van.

“Hey Lance!” Deadshot called out.

“Yeah?” The older man said, sparing a disgruntled look for the wounded assassin.

“Put a bullet between that son of a bitch’s eyes and send him my regards, would ya?” Lawton said as he spit a bloody tooth onto the ground in front of him.

“You know what, Lawton?” Lance said with a smirk, “It’ll be my pleasure.”

***

Fifteen minutes later

Lance had taken the wheel as Felicity multitasked by tracking the burner cell with her tablet while looking through the intel Trevor gave them on the other.

“Have you gotten through to Thea yet?”

She shook her head, “Everything’s down.” She blew out a harsh breath, “I just wish I knew what was going on out there.”

“What’s going on is a real humdinger of a storm,” Lance said with a grimace as he turned the wipers on and the van began to dog track on the road as the wind battered against them. “I thought it was bad before but, is it just me, or is it getting worse as we get closer to the base?”

“Sheesh,” Felicity said looking up at the windshield as the rain lashed violently around them. She started to tap on her tablet again and frowned. “Damn, the rain must be interfering with the system. I’m having a hard time getting a fix on their signal.”

Lanced glanced at the GPS on the dash as the screen scrambled and jumped, “I can’t even tell whether we’re still going north or what.” He grimaced, “See, this is why I prefer doing things the good old fashioned way with maps and compasses and still drive the same Mustang I’ve had since college; more computers means more problems! I know you’re good with all this technology crap but with everything glitching out like this who knows where the hell we are.”

“Yeah, but it shouldn’t be glitching out, that’s the point!” She put aside the tablets, tucking them safely in her bag, and scowled. “I don’t get it,” she said turning to Lance. “I set our coms up on military grade sat feeds, the van, too; there’s no way we should be out of range like this.”

“Maybe it’s the storm?” Lance suggested, looking out at the road with a bit of concern. He’d already hit the rumble strips twice because he couldn’t even see the road anymore. “The Colonel said his communications went out, too. Maybe the cloud cover is messing with reception.”

“Maybe,” Felicity muttered as she tried once again to pull up their GPS coordinates. “We should be
there already, do you see anything?”

“Not a goddamn—whooa!” Suddenly there was the sound of gunfire as it hit the side of the van and they were skidding off the road as the tires blew. Lance slammed down on the brakes and steered into the skid to prevent them from rolling over in the deep trench alongside the stretch of road. As it was they went nose down hard, the front end crumpling and causing the airbags to deploy, hitting him hard in the face and stunning him for a moment. Despite the front end damage, the windshield still held but was pressed against the deep muddy channel with the doors blocked by the rapidly rising water, mud, and overgrown shrubbery. There was only one way left in or out and that was through the back which was hanging up in the air and off the ground.

“You okay?” Lance asked her, wiping his mouth and noting the blood pouring from his nose. “You hurt?”

“I’m good,” she said and he turned to look to make sure. She’d been sitting back from the dash in order to use her computer so the airbag had barely touched her, leaving only a pink mark on her cheek that was already beginning to fade. “I’ll probably have a bruise from the seat-belt tomorrow but I’m okay. How’s your face?” She asked, seeing the blood as she straightened her glasses that had slipped down her nose.

“I won’t be winnin’ any beauty contests anytime soon but I’ll live,” he tried turning over the engine but nothing happened. “Goddamn it,” Lance swore. “Who the hell builds an armored tactical van with a BST cable and airbag sensors? This is why I won’t buy any new vehicles with that computer shit.”

“What’s wrong?” Felicity asked, rubbing her chest with a wince.

“The airbags went off so that means the fuel pump automatically disengaged along with the battery cable. It’s a safety feature to prevent electrical fires.” He looked out the windshield and scowled, “Doesn’t matter; even if I could start it back up and get out of this damn ditch the radiator’s gone and the engine compartment’s been compromised. This thing ain’t goin’ anywhere soon.”

“At least the van’s armored and the glass is bulletproof,” Felicity said, catching her breath and moaning against the pull of the seat-belt as it cut sharply across her shoulder and chest.

There was a loud banging and the sound of steel crumpling under force.

“That ain’t gonna stop those sons of bitches for long.” Lance undid his seat-belt and reached for the MP-5 machine pistol he got off of one of the dead mercs and made sure it was set to three round burst full auto before turning to her with the other gun he lifted, a Sig Sauer P226 .40 caliber pistol. “Okay sweetheart, we don’t have a lot of time before they’re gonna come through those doors.” As if they heard him the pounding increased and he kept one eye on the rear doors as they began to crumple under the repeated blows. “This gun is heavier and has a lot more recoil to it than what you’ve been shooting so watch your grip because it’s gonna kick up on ya.” He pulled the mag and checked it. “You’ve got about ten shots left so don’t lose count.” He loaded and chambered the bullet for her, waited for her nod, then handed it over. She took the gun from his hand and felt with her thumb for the slide. “No safety; closest thing it’s got is a decocking lever,” he told her, already knowing what she was doing. “This is a combat pistol so be careful with it. I’m going in first but if you fire your weapon, you aim for the body or the head, understood?”

Her eyes widened slightly and she paled, “Detective, I—”

“Detective, I—”

“This isn’t the range, Slick,” he told her a bit harshly but knew it was necessary. “These guys aren’t going down if you hit ‘em in the shoulder. We’re not here to take ‘em into custody, there’s no back-
up coming and no lawyers to sort it out afterwards; this is kill or be killed.” He gave her a hard look, “They aren’t men anymore, Felicity; they’re monsters, and they will kill you if you don’t kill ‘em first, understand me?”

“I understand,” Felicity said, nodding quickly.

“Get down low in the floorboard and stay behind the seat. If this heap is as fixed up as I think it is then there should be a metal plate in the seat back to give you some cover,” he told her just as the pounding got louder and the entire van began to shake. As she adjusted her grip and checked her weapon, he moved out of his seat and headed for the back of the van, motioning for her to get down further. “If you have to fire, you keep firing until they’re down!” He yelled as the noise from the pounding became almost deafening.

He counted his breaths, and waited. With a great rending noise the doors finally gave and flew open and he allowed his finger to squeeze the trigger the second he saw the enraged eyes of what had once been a man but who, as he told the frightened young woman behind him, was now something inhuman and monstrous.

Or perhaps they had always been monsters. Later, when he had time to reflect, he wondered about that. These once-men weren’t victims like Roy had been; they had chosen to accept the psychosis brought on by the Mirakuru knowing what would happen. They chose the lunacy that now consumed them in exchange for power and money; essentially selling what little bit of soul they had left. They had been killers for hire in life and then, as the frenzy of madness boiled their blood, they became something that brought forth every forgotten prayer he’d said as a boy. Prayers once faithfully recited in catechism then forgotten as despair led him to the bottom of one too many bottles of scotch sprang to his mind and to his lips as the echo of rending steel nearly deafened him.

He began to mutter, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, His only Son—”

//POP-POP-POP//

The first man went down, his head flying backwards as Lance bypassed the body armor and aimed right between his eyes. Blood and brain matter erupted like a fountain and even from a few feet away he could feel the wet gore of the blowback as it hit him.

“…Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate…”


He hit the second guy in the chest. The body armor slowing the .40 caliber rounds but not stopping them as the Teflon coated bullets ripped through muscle and bone. He watched as his body convulsed and went down hard.

“…Was crucified, died, and was buried: He descended into hell…”

//POP-POP-POP//

The third guy dodged his fire, his madness abating long enough for him to realize that his victims were well armed and fully capable of defending themselves.

//POP-POP-POP//

This time it wasn’t him doing the firing. Lance dodged the bullets as best he could but cornered in
the back of the van as he was there was nowhere to go. He ducked behind a heavy steel munitions box but his leg caught two of the bullets and he felt the numb shock as they hit followed by white hot pain as they burned and tore through his flesh causing him to grunt and cry out as the injured muscles and mangled ligaments spasmed and rebelled. He sucked in a harsh breath and gnashed his teeth, ducking his head down and pulling his leg towards his torso in a fetal position in order to make himself a smaller target even though his body protested the action vehemently. He raised his machine pistol to fire.

//CLICK//

He tossed it aside and reached for his P99 service pistol, but it was too late. He felt the van bob as the monster climbed inside to deal the coup de grace and the displacement of air as he swung his weapon toward him.

“Drop it,” he growled, “or I paint the windshield with the blonde bitch’s brains.”

He allowed the gun to clatter onto the floorboards while in his mind’s eye he heard the words he hadn’t had time to say out loud. They were spoken in the voice of his mother who had been dead for nearly sixteen years.

He waited for the sound of gunfire and remembered being a boy again, kneeling in St. John Cantius by her side. He remembered her beautiful face, so much younger to him now than it was then. He remembered her in her Sunday best and good pearls as she genuflected for mass, and how she always wore white gloves and a lace handkerchief over her hair to church, be it winter or summer, even though it had long since fallen out of fashion.

“…The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting…”

“Amen,” he opened his eyes and whispered the benediction to himself. He wondered if he’d see her in the afterlife, or even if there was an afterlife, but doubted he’d ever see proof of Heaven either way as the monster chuckled and leveled his weapon at his head, its rain slickened barrel at his temple.

//CRACK-CRACK//

Lance watched as two red holes bloomed in the center of the mercenary’s forehead causing him to buck backwards with the recoil then fall to his knees, pitching forward to reveal the gaping exit wound that was once the back of his skull.

He panted in pain and momentary confusion, his mind slowly catching up with what had just happened. He heard a soft noise behind him, a whimper, and he turned to see Felicity holding her weapon in shaking hands, the tip of it still smoking slightly as she stared at the once-man whose blood was now a thick running river making its way toward her.

She started as the blood touched her shoes skittering backwards but never dropped her weapon, instead remaining in the stance that he and Dig had drilled into her: Two hands on the weapon; one for the trigger, one to steady the grip applying isometric tension in order to reduce barrel rise from the recoil with the supporting arm bent and the firing arm fully extended with the elbow and wrist locked.

He was so upset over the fact that she had to kill a man and yet so goddamn proud of her at that
moment it wasn’t even funny.

“Felicity sweetheart, I need you to snap out of it; we need to wrap my leg before I bleed out,” he told her, letting her know she could drop her weapon while putting pressure on his wounds even though it hurt like a bitch. He allowed himself the release of a muttered curse as his companion awoke from her trance and scrambled towards him.

“I have to—to find the First Aid Kit,” she said shakily handing him her gun with trembling hands as she looked around, her eyes filling with tears as the adrenaline and stress hit her bloodstream.

“We’ve got to stop the bleeding,” Lance said painfully. “You need to find something to make a tourniquet.”

She snatched the black bandana off her head causing her bright gold curls to tumble messily over her shoulders as she quickly wrapped it around his leg.

“Tight!” He told her and when she tightened the ends he let out a muffled scream.

“Hang on—hang on!” She told him as she reached for the large box of medical supplies under the panel in the side of the van and grabbed a pair of scissors as well as a pressure bandage and several rolls of gauze that she tossed hastily near his leg.

She began to cut open his pants when he stopped her, “Wait!” He said, his hand still putting pressure on the wound over the now blood-soaked makeshift tourniquet. “I’ll do that. You need to get to the team and let them know an airstrike is coming. They need to get out of there.”

“I can’t leave you,” she said staring at him, her hand still clutching the scissors.

“I’ll be okay sweetheart, but you have to go,” he told her, still panting through the pain. “Any minute now these guys’ friends are gonna come looking for them and you can’t be here when that happens, understand? You need to get to Sara and the rest of them and tell them to get the hell out of Dodge but if you can’t you need to find another truck and get as far away from the base as you can.”

She looked down and used the scissors on his pants leg then ripped the material away as best she could to reveal the holes in his thigh. “Here,” she said, tearing open the pressure bandages and holding them tight against his leg.

“Felicity!” He said sternly, in order to get her attention again.

“Okay,” she said, licking her lips and dragging the large box closer to him so he could take care of his own wounds.

He applied the bandages as best he could as she maneuvered around him and reached inside the steel box he had used as cover, taking out several round LED charges. “What are you doing?” He asked as he bent his knee painfully and wrapped the gauze tight around the thick pad.

“If I get through and they don’t, we still need to blow the device,” Felicity said, her eyes fixed on the box as she shoved one the charges in her pocket along with a detonator. She picked up a second charge but scowled as it wouldn’t fit in her already tight jeans. “Damn it, I should have brought a jacket or something with bigger pockets!”

“Give me a couple of those,” he said, reaching over to grab them.

She handed them over obediently and looked at him, “Can you manage it on your leg?”
“Yeah,” he said as he shoved them in the pockets of his cargo pants although, truth be told, he wasn’t sure.

She looked down at the dead man and swallowed, her eyes closing.

“Hey,” he said softly, his hand reaching up to cup her chin and leaving a bloody streak in its wake. She had blood on her face, her hands, her arms, her shirt, and her jeans were soaked in gore from the knees down where she had kneeled in the pooling body fluids of the gunman to help him. She was absolutely covered in blood, looking like something out of a nightmare, but none of it hers, thank God. “He wasn’t a man anymore, sweetheart.”

“Yes, he was,” she said in a broken voice as fat salty tears rolled down her cheeks leaving streaks of pink down her neck as they mixed with his blood on her face. “I killed him; I’m a murderer.”

“No!” He said firmly, lifting her chin and forcing her to look at him. When her eyes opened he leaned forward and spoke in a quiet but authoritative tone he’d used on many a rookie in the field, “You are not a murderer; he was. You did what you had to do to survive. You saved both of us, Felicity; do you hear me? You survived!”

“Shēngcún,” she said under her breath.

He looked at her in confusion, “What?”

“It’s what Oliver told us he had to do on the island,” she told him quietly. “Shēngcún; it means ‘survive’ in Mandarin.”

“Well sweetheart, this is your island,” he told her, his eyes locked on her own. “You survive even if it means killing every son of a bitch who crosses your path, you hear me? You survive.”

She nodded again and took a deep breath, her features hardening with resolve, “Slade is going to be looking for us to try to get the device. Trevor said he’d been tipped off and these guys knew we were coming so we can’t just waltz in there and plant the charges.”

“Probably,” Lance said gruffly, shifting his leg with a wince. He looked at her, practically seeing the wheels as they turned in her mind. “Whatcha got in mind, Slick?”

“We need to keep him distracted,” she said keenly.

“Kind of hard to pull something like that off with a guy like Slade twice,” he told her, “especially since this time he’ll be expecting it.”

She looked up, “It worked the last time because I was the one distracting him. He underestimated me once; he’ll do it again.”

“That’s what the ex-Mrs. Lance used to refer to as ‘false logic’, sweetheart,” he told her, suddenly feeling very apprehensive as the fear left her eyes to be replaced by grim determination. “What are you thinking of doing?”

“I can distract him if you plant the charges,” she told him.

“No,” he said immediately. “I’ll get his attention and you—”

“He’ll kill you,” she cut in.

“And he’ll kill you if you go anywhere near him!” He said irascibly.
“No, he won’t.”

“The hell he won’t!” He told her with a scowl, “He held a sword to your throat the last time you got close to him, remember?”

“Not this time.”

“How do you know?” He demanded.

She hesitated before answering, “Oliver said that Slade thinks I’m…” she flushed, “I’m like the woman he was having hallucinations about; Shado. He thinks he’s, um…”

“He thinks what?” He asked, his stomach clenching.

“He’s developed a kind of, um, obsession with me because of the anti-serum thing,” she told him, “He thinks he’s in love with me and that we’re destined to be together or something like he was supposed to be with Shado.”

“Then there is no way in hell you’re getting anywhere near that crazy bastard,” he told her in no uncertain terms.

“Detective,” she said inflexibly, “If you go anywhere near him he’ll cut you down before you can say a single word. I, however, can keep him talking while you plant the charges.”

“Okay, let’s say I do agree to this completely insane plan of yours” he said, frustration and pain causing his jaw to clench, “once I plant the charges, how the hell are you going to get away from this guy?”

“I’m not.”

“What?” He said narrowing his eyes at her.

Her eyes met his, steely determination glinting in their depths, “We both knew this was probably a one way mission, Detective.”

“I’m not letting that son of a bitch take you with him!” He said heatedly. “No way in hell will I ever agree to that!”

“He’s not taking me anywhere,” she said, slipping her hand into her pocket and touching the charge tellingly.

He felt the breath catch in his throat, “Sweetheart, no. Absolutely not—no way—!”

“I’m doing this,” she told him, “With or without your help.”

“Felicity…”

“There’s no time!” She exclaimed, “There are no other options, no other plans to make; this is it!”

“You’re talking about suicide—!” The last vestiges of the good Catholic boy within him stuttered over the word and he swallowed the bile that threatened to erupt from his mouth at even the thought of it.

“They’re dead,” she said quietly.

He looked at her in confusion, “What?”
Tears began to roll down her cheeks once again, “They’re dead; they’re all dead: Dig, Roy, Sara… O-Oliver.” She paused to take a breath, “Even if they’re still alive now, if we don’t do this—if I don’t so this—they’re dead.” Her crystalline blue eyes met his again, “Don’t you see? I can’t let them die.”

He swallowed, fear stealing his voice for a moment as he thought of losing his daughter for the second time, “I know but--!”

“No buts!” She said shaking her head. “I don’t matter; they do.”

“That’s a load of bullshit and you know it!” He burst out.

“No, it’s not!” She told him, her eyes sparkling with an inner light that was almost mesmerizing in its intensity. “They’re the heroes; not me! The world needs them; they’re the people who keep the monsters away, who give people h-hope!” Her mouth quivered like his daughters’ used to when they were little right before they went on a crying jag.

It was moments like this, moments when he saw the vulnerability in her face that he realized just how small and delicate she really was; how fragile she appeared. How young; Jesus, she was practically a baby still. She was nearly three years younger than Sara but he’d never noticed it before because she always seemed so much older than most of her peers; strong, with a will of iron and a mind like a steel trap. Truth was she was just a kid; a twenty-two, no twenty-three year old kid.

Wait…

“It’s your birthday today, isn’t it?” Sara had sent him a package the other day and asked him to drop it off for her. It was still sitting in his backseat.

Shit.

“Yeah; well, not until midnight,” she chuckled damply. “Some birthday, huh?”

Why that got to him more than anything else, he didn’t know. He managed to keep it together through her tears, through seeing the innocence leave her eyes after she took another man’s life, through watching her tremble while kneeling in blood she had spilled; but hearing her say that made him want to breakdown and weep like a goddamn baby.

“Felicity,” he whispered, swallowing the lump in his throat. “Don’t do this. You have your whole life ahead of you, sweetheart. Don’t throw that away.”

“I don’t have a life though; not without them,” she looked away for a moment before licking the salt off her lips and beginning again. “I don’t have anybody else; not really,” she said softly. “They’re my home.” She looked up at him again pleadingly, “Without them I don’t have a home to go back to.”

He felt his own eyes fill and the wetness hit his cheeks, “And what the hell am I supposed to tell them if they live and you die?” He asked her in a broken voice. “What then? What about your dad or your brother and sister or that crazy grandmother you’re always on about? What am I supposed to do when I hand them that box of stuff you gave me after the last time Slade showed up, huh? Say, ‘Sorry I let your kid die, here’s some crap she left behind at my place; have a nice day,’?”

She bit her bottom lip and shifted, her eyes falling again to the floor, “Whether I go home or I die here, it’s still a death sentence.” Her eyes filled with that almost incandescent light again and he felt as though his heart was being ripped from his chest at the overwhelming grief he saw reflected in them, “Please.”
“Felicity…sweetheart, I--”

“Sara has you and Laurel, Diggle has his nephew, Oliver has Thea and Connor,” she told him. "They have people who need them. I can’t just let them die; not if I can save them.”

“What about you?” He demanded. “What about your family? They need you, too!”

“They’ll be okay,” she said with a small smile.

“No they won’t,” he said in a near shout. “I know what it feels like to lose a child, Felicity! Don’t do this!”

“I’m alone, Detective!” She shot back. “I’ve always been alone—the only time I wasn’t alone was with them! I love my family and they love me but they don’t need me; they don’t depend on me the way people depend on them.” She shook her head, “I spent too many years feeling like a ghost until Oliver and Diggle found me and gave me a home; don’t make me go back to that. If you won’t do this for me then do it for Sara. Help me! Help me save her so you don’t wind up losing her twice.”

And suddenly he couldn’t argue with her anymore. The words caught in his throat as he realized that she was right; there was no other choice to make.

He loved this girl; this funny little awkward girl who waltzed into his life when all he wanted was revenge and a bottle and gave him back everything he thought he’d lost. She gave him hope, gave him back his purpose, and gave him back his daughter who he thought he’d lost forever. She saved both his children more times than he could count by placing herself in the path of danger; she saved him.

He loved her almost as much as his own flesh…but she wasn’t his daughter; Sara was, and as much as it pained him to see her sacrifice herself, she was right. It was an impossible choice but if he had to choose between sending her to her death and losing Sara again…?

God help him for what he was about to do, he thought. If there was an afterlife then he was surely destined to burn in hell for this.

“Okay,” he said in a broken voice, once again swallowing the bile in his throat and offering her his arm. “Help me up so we can get out of here.”

As they made their way clumsily around the fallen man and headed out the back of the van, the wind began to whip around them, the rain pelting against their flesh in stinging little drops that felt like thousands of tiny needles.

Once outside, he leaned heavily against the van and hopped on one leg before reaching into his shoulder holster and handing her his P99 service pistol. “Take this.”

“Detective…” The gun slipped for a moment in her blood-slickened hands before she adjusted her grip.

“Take it,” he told her as he panted breathlessly. He looked down at his pants leg that was soaked in blood and pointed to his feet. “I used up some of the ammo back at the base fighting off those mercs; check the mag but you should still have at least eight rounds.”

She slid her thumb on the release and checked as he told her to, “Got it.”

“Between that and the Sig you should have sixteen rounds left; don’t lose count. Now reach into my boot and give me my back up piece.” She did as he asked and he thumbed off the safety. “Okay,
sweetheart, you still have that detonator?"

She nodded, the rain getting in her eyes and fogging her glasses. “I’ve got it.”

He looked at her steadily and licked his lips, the stinging rain coating his dry tongue. God, he wanted a drink. He could practically taste the sweet tang of the whiskey on his tongue. If he survived this he was going to have to go from the hospital straight to a meeting. “Are you sure about this?”

“It’s the only way,” she told him faintly. “Can you manage?”

He nodded sharply, “You keep him distracted and I’ll plant the charges.” He laid his hand on her cheek and she leaned against it, looking so much like a child, like his child for a moment that he nearly lost his nerve. Every instinct he had told him to take this girl and handcuff her to the van while he handled this on his own, but he knew better. This was the only way, he reminded himself. “You listen to me; you do whatever you have to do to stay alive.”

“I–”

“Felicity!” He said sharply and she looked at him with those bright blue eyes again; the eyes of the purest soul he had ever known. “Whatever it takes, sweetheart. Kill them before they can kill you, do you hear me? Promise me. Shank-toon!”


“Whatever,” he told her. “Just do it and we’ll get Chinese food later, on me. You do whatever it takes to survive and I’ll even throw in some eggrolls and a couple of fortune cookies,” he said, squeezing her hand. “Promise me.”

“I promise…” she said softly before taking off her glasses, blinking rapidly as the rain clung to her lashes and ran down her face like tears, “Here,” she said handing them over.

“Don’t you need these?” He asked her as he stuffed them in the pocket of his tee shirt.

“No,” she said quietly. “Not anymore.”

She turned to go but he reached for her hand to stop her.

He stared at it, not wanting to let go but knowing he had to. He ran his thumb over the pale blue veins, her fingers so tiny and delicate and her hand so small and soft in his own. Squeezing it affectionately, he looked at her for an extended moment before speaking, “In case I don’t get to say it again…”

She cupped his cheek in her other hand and kissed him softly like his girls used to before they got too old for that sort of thing. She pulled back and smiled at him, “If, um, if anything happens can you tell everybody—Tell Oliver and my family I…”?

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Yeah, I’ll tell them. Goodbye Slick.”

“Goodbye Detective,” she smiled once more before turning and walking into the rain. He watched her slight form as it headed off, her hair caught by the wind and rain as it swirled around her. Just when he had the overwhelming urge to call out to her, to pull her back, he blinked and she disappeared.

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Quentin leaned forward in his chair and looked at the faces around him. The Lair was silent, no one daring to so much as breathe as his words settled around them. Diggle held his hand over his mouth, his eyes stricken. Thea was crying silently, the tears running unfettered down her cheeks. Roy’s head hung down, cradled in his hands, his eyes closed. Barbara had turned her chair to face away from him; he couldn’t see her face but he didn’t need to.

“She was going to kill herself?”

Lance turned to Tim. Unlike the others his expression was one of barely concealed rage. “You were going to let her kill herself?” The younger man challenged. “Answer me, you son of a bitch!”

“Hey!” Diggle said sharply, raising his head to glare at the younger man. “Watch your goddamn mouth and show some respect!”

“I got this,” he told Diggle, waving him off. “There was no ‘let’ to it,” Lance told him. “Felicity was going no matter what I did and I couldn’t exactly chase after her with a couple of holes in my leg.”

“You could have tried harder,” Tim said, clenching his jaw.

“I tried plenty hard, kid,” Lance told him. “Whether I helped her or not she was going in.”

Dig turned to him, “Why didn’t you tell me?” He asked in a barely recognizable voice before clearing his throat. “About the charges; why didn’t you tell me—we, that she—that she was going to–?”

Lance inhaled sharply and leaned back, running his hand across the top of his head and stretching, “Same reason none of us talked about it.” He tightened his lips into a grimace and rolled his neck to work out the kinks before continuing, “Besides, it was her story to tell; not mine.”

“You should have called—!” Tim leaned forward and rubbed his hand over his mouth in agitation, “You said she told you about her family—why the hell didn’t you call us and tell us she was suicidal! We—I would have come and got her!”

Both Dig and Lance looked at him sharply but it was the detective who answered. “She wasn’t suicidal,” he spat out in succinct diction.

“She was going to blow herself up!” He raged.

“Yes, she was going to sacrifice herself but she wasn’t suicidal,” Lance said firmly.

“I’m sorry, Detective, but I fail to see the difference!” The younger man raged.

“Every time one of you people puts on a costume and heads out on the street, every time a cop straps on his piece, every time a soldier goes into battle, they are making a conscious decision to face death!” He told him. “It doesn’t make them suicidal; it makes them heroes!”

“Yeah, except Felicity isn’t a soldier, or a cop, and she certainly isn’t a hero!” Tim said sharply.

“Fuck you, asshole!” Roy said, his head snapping up to shoot daggers at the other man with eyes that were unrepentantly damp. “Felicity is as much a hero as any of us, if not more so, and if you don’t know that then you don’t know shit about her!”

“That girl has saved the lives of every person in this room and in this city more times than I can count and she did it without ever putting on a costume or looking for a thank you,” Lance told him. “I’ll wager that’s more than you or any of the rest of your little group of Bats can say.”
“And yet you let her go through with that plan knowing what could have happened to her! You turned her into a—” Tim clenched his teeth together, unable to finish his sentence.

“Into a what?” Thea asked, her cheeks ruddy with indignation.

“A killer, okay?” Tim answered in a low tone.

“Tim!” Barbara whipped around to snap at him angrily.

“Boy, you are fixing to cross a line that you don’t want crossed; don’t make me get up and have to beat your goddamn ass,” Diggle said slowly, his eyes glittering dangerously.

Roy glared at him, “I suggest you take that back because if he doesn’t give you a beat down, I will and, trust me, you don’t have enough ass in your pants to take me on right now; not after saying that shit about Felicity.”

“And when they’re done I get what’s left,” Thea told him. “And unlike them I can get mean. I’m a girl; I have no problem with going straight for the crotch.”

Tim flushed crimson and looked around the room to see all of his companions, including Barbara, directing looks of outrage towards him. After a beat, he muttered an apology, “Sorry, I just…” He blew out a harsh breath.

Lance sighed and leaned forward to pat the younger man on the shoulder, “It’s okay, son. We get it.”

“No,” Tim shook his head. “You don’t get it; you can’t get it! I just can’t—it’s Baby, you know? I just… she…” he swallowed audibly and buried his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking.

Barbara wheeled her chair next to him and placed her hand on his other shoulder, “It’s okay. She’s okay. It’s over.”

“It’s not over,” Tim said, looking up at her with stricken eyes. “It’s not…” He shook his head, “I should have come for her sooner; I knew something was wrong but I got so caught up in the bullshit with Bruce that I let myself lose touch and—” His face crumpled slightly and he swiped at his eyes with his fingers, “She thought she was all alone; she was all alone because we forgot about her. I didn’t even call her on her birthday; I forgot! I didn’t even send a lousy card. We let her slip away and…” He swallowed, “I never called her,” he said quietly. “She would call me every once in a while but I wouldn’t call her. I’d save her emails sometimes or…every once in a while we’d connect, but I hadn’t spoken to her in months until she called Tam. Six months ago, when this all happened, I probably hadn’t spoken to her in a year. I can’t even remember why now, it was like she just…it just slipped my mind. I knew she was there, somewhere in the world, but I never thought about her unless Tam mentioned her and, even then, I never had an urge to reach out. I was visiting Dick a couple of months ago; it would have been nothing to stop by Starling. I was so close, just a couple of hundred miles if that, but I never even thought about it. Sometimes I’d think, ‘Maybe I’ll call her tomorrow,’ but I never did.” He ran his hand through his hair causing it to stand on end messily, “I forgot about her, Barb; what kind of friend does that make me?”

“A busy one, son,” Lance told him. He snorted, “Besides, you wouldn’t have reached her anyway! That girl lives in this basement. If Oliver would let her she’d have probably given up that little house of hers ages ago and just camped out here.”

“He’s right,” Dig admitted. “I think half my job sometimes revolves around just making sure she goes home to sleep before she collapses. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve found her asleep on her keyboard surrounded by used coffee cups and fast food wrappers.”
“With the keys making those weird square impressions on her face,” Thea grinned tearfully. “I used to tease her that she was going to wind up with QWERTY permanently tattooed to her face.”

Tim swallowed but couldn’t seem to manage a smile yet. He looked to Barbara again, “What do I do now?”

“Nothing,” Barbara told him. “They’re right; Felicity is just as much a soldier as any of us. You can’t stop her, you can’t save her from what she feels she needs to do; all any of us can do is support her just like she supports her team when they’re the ones in the field.”

“No, but—!” He stopped, “I can’t just ‘handle’ this, Barb! I can’t keep quiet about something this big, but who do I tell? Do I tell Tam, or Luke, or their dad? If I don’t, what then? What if…what if I do like you taught me and control the flow of information and she winds up doing something like that again because I didn’t say anything only this time there is no mystery save? I just can’t…now that I know what she almost did, what happened to her, how do I…?” He took a shuddering breath, “It’s like it was with Stephanie. I should have stopped her after Bruce kicked her off the team; I shouldn’t have just let her to go off on her own again just because I was pissed. Stephanie—she—we thought she… She died, Barb,” he bit his lip and shook his head as if to deny some internal demon from taking hold. “She died because she didn’t think she was good enough; she thought she was alone like Felicity did because I didn’t—”

“Stop!” Barbara said firmly, “Felicity isn’t Stephanie. Stephanie was a mixed up kid who had a hard life and went through stuff no one should ever have to go through, but her decisions, her mistakes, were on her, not you.”

Lance shifted closer to the distraught young man, “Look son, I don’t know who or what you’re talking about, but I can tell you that the Felicity Smoak I know is a hero and that she’s the smartest, bravest, most centered person I’ve ever had the privilege to meet.” Tim looked up at him silently, and he patted his shoulder again, “No one in this room owes that girl more than I do,” he said. “She took a bullet for one of my daughters, stood up to a madman with a sword for another, and saved my life more than once.” He gestured around the room, “All this? This ain’t Oliver, kid; this is all that girl. These guys all think they’re doin’ something when they put on their little outfits and go after bad guys but, I got news for you, it was Felicity who saved this city time and again, and most of it she did on her own. Oh, don’t get me wrong; they helped,” he chuckled, “but she did all the heavy lifting.”

“He’s right,” Dig told him quietly. “She’s the one who talked Lance through disarming the Markov Device. She always thinks of the lives lost that day, but she saved most of the Glades and the city by taking out the one under the main fault line. Five hundred and three people died that day but without her, thousands would have been lost.”

“She saved me a couple of times,” Roy added. “She talked them into keeping me alive after I had my psychotic break and she’s the one who worked with Star Labs to come up with a cure, not to mention the whole ARGUS airstrike thing Lance was talking about.”

“She saved Ollie—a lot; and me too, I guess. Plus, she was my friend even when I didn’t want one; even when I was a raging bitch who was angry at everyone and everything, she was always there,” Thea chimed in. “Trust me, Felicity is plenty tough.”

“Of course she is; she’s marrying Bruce, right?” Barbara said with a snort. “You either have to be some kind of tough or completely nuts to take something like that on.”

“Not to mention Ollie,” Thea said wryly. “She’s put up with a lot of his crap but you just know she’s going to kick his ass when he shows up in Gotham.”
“Wish I was there to watch it,” Barbara chuckled.

“Me, too,” Thea grinned, brightening suddenly.

“She’s going to use the Loud Voice,” Diggle said roundly.

“Really loud,” Roy said, running his hand over his head. “And speaking as someone whose had the Loud Voice directed his way, it’s not fun.”

“I almost feel sorry for the poor bastard,” Lance chuckled.

“I don’t,” Thea said. “I tried telling him but, as usual, he just ignored me and went off like a total dumbass.” She shook her head, “You just know he’s going to totally screw this up, right? He can swing from rooftops and fight guys twice his size, but when it comes to Felicity he’s completely in over his head.”

“She’s going to destroy him,” Roy intoned.

“I’ve got fifty that says the first thing she tells him to do when he shows up is get his head out of his ass,” Lance said pulling out his wallet and dropping a few notes on the coffee table.

“I’ll take that action and raise you that the first thing she does is make that sideways face she likes to do when he’s talking shit and say, ‘Really?’ then proceed to tear him a new one,” Dig said, taking out his own billfold and tossing down a C-note.

“I’ll double it if she hits him,” Lance told him.

“Done,” Dig said, taking his hand in a firm clasp.

“I’ll put down fifty that Ollie just stands there looking confused because he can’t figure out why she’s mad or how he screwed up in the first place after she’s done,” Thea laughed.

“That’s a sucker’s bet,” Roy snorted.

“See? Everything’s going to be fine,” Barbara assured him.

“I guess so,” he said taking another shaky breath. “Crap,” Tim winced.

Barbara looked at him, “What?”

“Bruce,” Tim said in a gravelly tone.

“What about him?”

He shot her a disparaging look, “Even if I keep this from Luke and Tam, you know I have to tell him about all this, right? If I don’t and he finds out…”

“Shit,” she breathed before leaning back in her chair and running her hand over her furrowed brow.

He looked up at her hopefully, “Unless you want to--?”

“No way,” she said firmly. “It’s all yours. You’re still technically his kid and, trust me, if he hasn’t killed Dick by now for all the shit he’s said to him, you’ll probably survive. Me?” She snorted, “The only thing I have going for me is that I can use my hacking skills to go completely underground along with the fact that Alfred likes me enough to probably quit if he murders me.”
“Great,” Tim sighed and looked over at Lance again before doing a double-take, “Hang on for a second; you said she just disappeared.”

“Huh?” Lance said, looking at him askance.

“You said that she walked away and then just vanished,” Tim said slowly. “All of you said she either appeared out of nowhere or disappeared without a trace but none of you saw how she did it. How could she just vanish?”

The older cop shrugged, “I don’t know. It was raining pretty hard and it was dark. All I know is that one second she was with me beside the van and the next she was gone.”

“Were you in the woods or something? Maybe she just ducked behind some trees?” He suggested.

“It was an old Army base in the middle of the desert,” Lance said dryly. “No trees to speak of; just scrub brush and dirt with a hell of a lot of rusted out old barracks.” He sighed, “Look son, there’s no mystery to it; it was raining cats and dogs that night. Visibility was—I could barely see three feet in front of my face and I was weak from blood loss. Don’t read more into it than there is.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tim said, shaking it off. “You’re probably right. How far were you from the base?” He asked.

“A ways,” Lance told him. “Maybe five miles or so. Took me a while to get to her. I found a branch I used as a crutch along with the truck the mercs used and drove most of the way then parked it just outside the perimeter behind some barracks and walked the rest.” He paused, “The storm had picked up so it hid the engine noise but by the time I got there Slade was so fixated on her I could have just driven right up to him and he wouldn’t have cared.”

“She was already there when you got there?”

“Yeah, for a while, I think,” Lance said.

“How did she beat you there? You had a truck but she was on foot, right?”

He shrugged, “She was on foot but she wasn't wounded so she probably cut across and went straight to him. I had to take the road then go around so it took me longer plus I wasn’t exactly up to full speed, you know?”

Tim looked around at all, “You guys said Slade looked surprised to see her but if she went directly for him then he had to have seen her coming, right?”

“Slade was busy with Oliver,” Dig told him. “Like I said, one minute he was taking Oliver down and the next she was just standing there and they started talking. I couldn’t hear what she and Slade were saying but from the look on Oliver’s face and the way he was screaming it wasn’t good.”

“I couldn’t even hear that,” Lance said. “I did see the look on his face though. The minute Oliver saw me I think he figured out what she was about to do because he tried to drag himself through the mud to get to her. I said, ‘screw it’ and double-timed it back to the truck; I was going to just run the son of a bitch down. I knew it probably wouldn’t kill him but I figured it might buy me enough time to get Felicity and the rest of them out of there. Before I could get to it though, Felicity detonated the charges and I got caught up in the shockwave. There was a lot of metal laying around so I took on a bunch of shrapnel and got knocked unconscious.”

“Wait, so Oliver saw you but Slade didn’t?” Tim asked.
“Like Dig said, he was too caught up with Felicity to care,” Lance told him. “I figured I could use his distraction to nail him with the Humvee and lay some rubber on the back of the bastard’s skull.”

“That’s weird,” Barbara said. “Deathstroke is a trained soldier and mercenary for hire; you’d think he would have noticed you hobbling towards a truck containing his big payday with a couple of charges in your hands much less a big truck hauling ass towards his position.”

The older man shrugged, “It was loud. The storm was whipping up real bad at that point. It even spun out the beginnings of a tornado,” Lance told them. “At one point it actually took me off my feet. I probably looked like Mary Poppins floatin’ around in the goddamn desert with my magical walkin’ stick.”

“Didn’t Mary Poppins have a suitcase and an umbrella?” Roy asked.

“I don’t know,” Lance growled. “Fuckin’ Gandalf the Great then or whoever the hell it is who carries a stick.”

“Gandalf the Great?” Diggle asked with a smirk.

“Felicity and Sara like to watch movies after dinner,” Lance told him gruffly. “They’d put on some Disney kid’s movie cartoon bullshit and I’d nap on the couch until it was over.”

“I didn’t think Lord of the Rings was a cartoon,” Roy said dubiously. “I don’t even think it was a Disney movie.”

“It had fairies and some creepy little short guy who kept huntin’ for some damn ring; it was a Disney movie,” Lance countered.

“Getting back to what you were saying, I get that the storm was bad but if you could clearly see all of them then he could see you,” Tim told him.

“He had his back to me the whole time.” Lance fixed him with a steady gaze, “Look kid, I appreciate how you’re trying to piece this together but Slade wasn’t in his right mind. He was delusional. He didn’t even notice it when she attached the magnetic charge to his back.”

“She put it on his back?” Tim asked incredulously. “How?”

“He picked her up and slung her over his shoulder.”

“Wait, he was physically holding her when she planted the charge on him?” He said in disbelief.

“Yeah,” Lance told him. “I looked back and saw him hauling her off like a sack of potatoes and then everything went boom!”

He scratched his head and tightened his lips in confusion, “You were closest to her right before the explosion; how did she get out if he was holding her? Did he put her down? Did she run away before hitting the switch; what?”

The Detective rubbed the stubble of his beard and looked at him uncertainly, “Honestly? I have no idea. She should have been killed instantly; we’re talking pink mist kind of dead. Slade had one of the charges on him with her in his arms and was right next to the truck with the device when it blew. I saw her palm the detonator, watched him take her behind the truck, then heard the blast. After that, I don't know; I got knocked out by the shockwave and some shrapnel—and that was after ducking my ass behind a big boulder halfway to the truck that was parked a few hundred feet away. Next thing I remember is waking up for a second in a dog pile with the rest of the team and her driving us
out of there like a bat out of hell.”

“Felicity got everyone out? I thought ARGUS came and got you guys?” Tim asked in surprise.

“ARGUS airlifted us out from the hanger where we’d left Trevor and them after they bombed the base,” Lance told her.

Thea frowned, “She never told me that but, then again, I can see why she left out the details. I was pretty upset when I got to the hospital because all I knew was that everyone was in critical condition and she looked like an extra in a slasher film. I freaked out when I saw all the blood; I mean, even her hair was covered in it. She just barely managed to calm me down before they had to pump me full of Thorazine. One of the nurses let her take a shower afterwards in one of the rooms and she had me go buy her some clothes and stuff to change into so she wouldn’t have to wear a hospital gown and paper underwear to our hotel.”

She took a shaky breath, “I was so freaked out by everything that Felicity suggested we just share a room because I didn’t want to sleep by myself. We never even bothered to get a second room the entire time we were down there since I was the only one sleeping anyway. Felicity either stayed in the hospital or just laid awake next to me keeping watch while I tried to get some rest. I didn’t want to sleep but she lost her glasses which meant I had to do all the driving and she wouldn’t let me get behind the wheel if I was tired. As soon as everyone was stable enough to be moved she had them transferred to Starling General and hired someone to drive her car back since I drove her Mini there. She and I flew back on the QC helicopter then I stayed over at her place until Ollie came home.” She paused, “I don’t think she slept more than an hour or two a night even after we were back in Starling but she never stopped moving. If she wasn’t at the hospital or QC, she was in the Foundry or taking care of stuff for the guys. I had to practically force her to take ten minutes to eat and catch a nap.”

“Why didn’t she call us?” Barbara frowned, asking the same question Tim had asked earlier. “If she didn’t want to involve us then she could have at least called Tam and her sister would have come down to help.”

“It wasn’t like they were in the hospital for months or anything; I mean, other than Roy,” Thea told her. “The two of us had it even though she was running on empty for a while there. Sin; you haven’t met her yet but she’s kind of a member of the team, too—she helped a lot. Plus, Laurel and her mom pitched in,” her eyes flickered towards Lance as she spoke. Even though her voice remained even there was a hint of anger in her expression although it wasn’t directed towards the Detective.

The older man rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly looking a bit weary, “Yeah, well, they showed up a few days after all of that went down. In the confusion none of us had time to think to even call them. After I got out of surgery I realized we needed reinforcements since none of us were going to be runnin’ any marathons for a while.” His lips tightened, “Laurel kind of took over taking care of Oliver while Dinah helped out me and Sara. Thea and Sin took shifts between Dig and Roy.”

“Sounds like you guys went through hell and back,” Barbara said, her eyes sharp as she took in their body language.

“It was…rough,” Lance said. “For all of us.”

“Sounds like it but at least with that many people pulling together it had to have helped some. Sounds like Felicity was due for a break by then,” she sympathized.

“What break?” Dig snorted. “Felicity had her hands full with her job and keeping up with everything else. Hell, I honestly don’t know how she managed it all. She went so far as to call my sister-in-law so I could stay with them for a few weeks while I recovered and took care of my place in the
meantime. When I got home she had basically redecorated the whole damn thing; said I needed more color in my life,” he chuckled. “She even had the damn place repainted.”

Roy nodded, “She talked to my landlord and made sure my rent was paid up for like six months after I got home plus took care of all of my bills. She also had a cleaning crew sent in. She told me afterwards that ’squalor wasn’t conducive to healing,’ and that just walking in there could give me a staph infection,” he said mockingly.

“She wasn’t lying,” Thea said, wrinkling her nose. “I swear to God I once walked into your apartment and saw an old sandwich walk itself across the room.”

He rolled his eyes at her, “It wasn’t that bad; just some old pizza boxes and stuff. Still, she used Oliver’s Arrow fund to buy me some furniture including a new bed and a pullout couch for Sin and Thea in case they stayed over. She even bought new towels and sheets plus filled my fridge.” He smirked, “I didn’t even recognize the place when I got home. At first I thought I was in the wrong apartment; I had no idea the carpet was even green until she had it cleaned. The first time I tried putting my feet on the new coffee table she bought, Sin nearly punched me in the face.”

“That’s nothin’,” Lance grinned. “I came home and found out she bought me this big ass fish tank full of these black and white ugly lookin’ goldfish with bumpy foreheads she called ’panda oranges’ or somethin’.” He gestured as he described the scene, “She had the whole thing set up to look like a police precinct with this little miniature police station and fake handcuffs at the bottom, and even a little ceramic jail cell with orange goldfish swimmin’ around that she said were the ’trustees’. Said the black and whites were the cop fish and their job was to keep the orange ones in line and protect the plants from getting over-watered when I wasn’t there.”

Everyone except Tim laughed, the younger man still obviously disturbed by all the recent revelations as he puzzled over the information he’d been given silently.

“What did she do for Sara?” Barbara asked curiously.

“After Sara got out of the hospital she went home with my ex but she and Sara were constantly swappin’ clothes and stuff,” Lance told her. “Besides, Sara was never much into big gestures and Felicity knew that.”

“What about Oliver,” Barbara asked. “What did she do for him?”

“Nothing; Laurel wouldn’t let her,” Thea muttered and Lance winced.

Diggle offered Thea a disapproving look, “She made sure Oliver’s presence was felt in the office and protected his business. Even though Isabel was out of the country when all this went down, she didn’t want anyone making a power play in his absence. She called in Walter to help act as Oliver’s stand-in whenever there was a board meeting but for the most part she did everything herself. She practically ran Queen Consolidated until Oliver was ready to come back.”

Tim frowned, “So wait, Felicity survived the blast, managed to get all of you into a truck by herself, drove you out before the airstrike, and yet none of you knows how she came out of all that in one piece?”

“You’re still on this, kid?” Lance asked him in slight exasperation.

“It just doesn’t make sense,” Tim said insistently. “Someone has to know what happened.”

“No one but Felicity, and she ain’t talking,” Roy snorted.
“We’ve tried to get her to talk about it,” Thea said. “I know I asked her a few times.”

“Me, too,” Roy said. “All she’d tell me is that things were kind of nuts and she didn’t remember much. I thought about pressing her on it but the one time I tried she kind of freaked out.”

“What do you mean she freaked out? You never told me that,” Diggle asked in a dangerously low tone. “What did you say to her?”

Roy threw his hands up in supplication, “Hey, I didn’t say anything; I just was thinking out loud and trying to puzzle out how she did it, that’s all.”

“What did she say?” Tim asked.

“Well, I asked her how she managed to have time to get away from the blast, get a truck, then get all of to safety that fast,” Roy told him.

Tim frowned, “So you knew she was the one to get you out before Lance told you? You said you were out.”

“Yes, mostly. I woke up for less than a second at best,” he told him. “I remember hearing her crying and feeling her pull me into the back of the truck but that’s it. I don’t even know if that was real or just something I dreamed about.”

“Sounds like you guys really owe her a lot,” Barbara said quietly.

“Yeah, you could say that,” Roy said, dropping his gaze.

Tim nodded, “What did she say when you asked her about it?”

“Nothing,” he said, shifting uncomfortably as his voice grew quieter. “She started to shake real bad and cry so I freaked out and tried to calm her down. I just knew if Oliver or Dig found out I upset her that bad they’d kick my ass.”

“Damn straight,” Diggle said with a growl.

He turned to him, “Hey, I brought her ice cream for like a week to make up for it; that expensive Ben and Jerry’s shit, too, man. That crap is over five bucks a pint before taxes! Do you even know how much ice cream Felicity goes through in a week when she’s all stressed out? Trust me, I wasn’t asking her any more questions after that.”

Tim’s eyes scanned the faces of his companions, “Did anyone else try to ask her about it? Oliver maybe?”

“Oliver talk to anyone about their feelings? Please,” Thea said derisively.

“I asked her but, like Roy said, she started to get upset so I dropped it,” Dig said wearily. “Then again, I tried talking to Oliver about it as well and he about bit my head off for even trying.”

“They can both be stubborn as hell,” Lance agreed. “I just offered to be there when she was ready; when I found out she quit QC and the team I figured it finally hit her and she needed some time away to sort things out.” He paused, “All she’d ever tell me was that it was crazy and she didn’t understand it herself so she didn’t want to talk about it. Tell you the truth, I was just grateful she was still alive; the details didn’t really matter to me.”

“Maybe if we asked again--?” Tim began
“If Felicity hasn’t said anything by now then she's not going to,” Dig added ruefully.

“Not yet anyway,” Barbara said. “If and when Bruce finds out about this, he’s not going to let it go until she does.” She gave Tim a pointed look, “You know how he is with unsolved mysteries; he hates them even more than Baby does.”

“If he tries pushing her like that she’s going to shut down,” Dig said warningly.

“Yeah, all of you should just leave her alone and drop it,” Roy told them, a slight edge creeping into his tone.

“But if she knows—” Tim began.

“You didn’t see how scared she got just from thinking about it,” Roy told him harshly. “I’m telling you; don’t even go there.”


“She has a point, Timmy,” Barbara admitted. “Let Baby handle this one on her own and leave it be.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tim nodded reluctantly, looking around, “You’re probably right; we should just let it go. Baby will probably tell Bruce about all of this eventually, right? And, if not, what does it matter?”


“First off, that’s not a word,” Roy shot back tetchily. “Second, why do I have to be the one to go? Why can’t you do it?”

As they argued good-naturedly among themselves, Tim took a moment to ponder all he had learned and especially what he hadn’t.

Would she ever tell Bruce on her own without his interference? Tim had to wonder. Each of them had told a little bit of the story from their own perspective but one thing that was consistent within each of their versions of the events was that Felicity disappeared then reappeared inexplicably into the fray, and had never offered anyone answers as to how she managed it.

Two things suddenly occurred to Tim:

One; he absolutely, without a doubt, needed to call Bruce and let him know what happened to both the Omega Device and his fiancée six months ago. This was way too big to try to cover up or leave to chance.

And two; Felicity needed to fill in the missing parts of the story because something told him those details were important. Why, he didn’t know, but something told him that, despite what Thea and the rest of them seemed to think, it did matter after all.
Isabel had left for lunch so, after getting with Tatsu and setting up her passwords along with her new handy-dandy handle (not exactly the most exciting one she could have chosen but she figured Sara would appreciate it), she headed for the penthouse to eat something and take a quick nap before she
had to return in time to meet Sara and Lyla along with the rest of the team. It was a calculated risk on her part; she fully expected Bruce to scoop her up off the sidewalk and carry her off, but she needed to regroup and she wasn’t comfortable closing her eyes and taking a nap in her new office with Helena in the building despite their apparent cease-fire. She needed to get home, take some herbs and a shower, and then take a cat nap.

She should be used to sleep deprivation, she told herself in the cab. She hadn’t slept all that well in months but the last few weeks had been particularly stressful. She paid the cabbie and reminded herself to stop by a dealership the next day to lease a new car, especially since she had an expense account for that sort of thing now. While cabs were a way to conveniently avoid Bruce’s trackers, taking a taxi every day to a supposedly covert installation was a little ridiculous if you thought about it.

She leaned heavily against the side of the elevator the entire ride up, her heels dangling from her fingertips as she stepped out in her stocking-clad feet and trudged towards the door to the penthouse/fortress she now thought of as hers.

“Tam?” She called out looking around. The workmen were gone and the apartment seemed quiet, which was surprising. She had been prepared to lock the bedroom door and stuff cotton in her ears or sneak into Bruce’s study for a catnap if the workmen were still there, but she wasn’t about to question her good fortune…even though she probably should. The penthouse being empty in the middle of the afternoon was probably a bad sign but she was beyond caring at that point. She rubbed her shoulder and moaned as she walked into the master suite, dropping her heels by the door and stripping as she made her way into the room.

Bruce was a problem for later, she told herself. Shower, food, pillow; that’s all she was prepared to deal with at the moment and not even the looming threat of having to deal with a pissed off Batman/fiancé was enough to stop her. She was taking this damn dress off, stuffing her face, and staring at the back of her eyelids for a couple of hours minimum and then she’d deal with it.

She tossed her jacket and coat on the bench at the foot of the bed then reached for the zipper on her dress, her hands fumbling with the tab because of her sore shoulder. She heard someone enter the room behind her, “Tam, can you help me? I’ve had a day like you wouldn’t believe and it’s not even close to being over yet.”

“Sounds like we’ve both had an interesting day,” she heard a deceptively calm voice say just as familiar hands reached out for her.

“I’ll bet,” she said, not bothering to turn to look at Bruce as he unzipped her dress. She let it pool at her feet as she pulled her slip over her head and tossed it with the rest until she was standing in nothing but her bra and panties. She reached into the drawers for a fresh nightgown when he stopped her by placing a firm hand on her shoulder causing her to hiss in pain.

“What happened?” He asked, forcing her to face him, his expression thunderous as he took in her bruised jaw and split lip along with the bruising across her ribs and shoulder.

“Orientation got a little rough,” she said wearily. “Now, if you don’t mind, I want to take a quick shower and get a bite to eat before I have to go back this afternoon.”

“You’re not going anywhere near that place ever again,” he said in the dark rumble of the Bat.

“I’m not arguing with you right now, Bruce; I’m too damn tired,” she said, heading for the bathroom without bothering to retrieve a nightgown first. She ignored his presence behind her as she stripped off her bra and underwear and headed into the shower.
She turned on all the taps and moaned in pleasure as the hot water massaged her tired and achy muscles. She bathed quickly but efficiently, resisting the urge to linger as Bruce was pacing back and forth on the other side of the shower doors, occasionally pausing long enough to toss her a thunderous look of barely contained frustration as if to remind her that, by the way, he was still pissed.

Like she hadn’t noticed that already, she snorted wearily. From his behavior she knew she’d have to wrap this up soon despite how nice the water felt. While spending an hour under multiple massaging shower heads sounded more than a little tempting, she knew if she tried he’d probably just come in after her and she was not in the mood to deal with a naked and angry Bat at the moment.

Everything hurt. Not only did Helena get in some solid hits but she hadn’t worked out in a few weeks and her muscles felt like they were on fire. Yeah, she definitely needed to get back in shape and stay there if there was even the possibility that she might have to deal with crap like this on a regular basis. Hopefully the workout equipment and training dummies she ordered were in the Alternate Watchtower ready to be unpacked. If not she was going to have to carve some time out of her schedule and see if Wildcat could train her while she was at Orbital. In fact, that might give her an excuse to get closer to him without rousing suspicions. She was fairly certain she had a solid ally in Grant and he might have an idea of what’s going on over there.

She drew the washcloth across her shoulder and winced. She was so dressing for comfort when she headed back to the office that evening; no more figure hugging designer wear until the herbs kicked in, that’s for sure. She’d be the crisp professional who dressed for success later when her lip wasn’t the size of a balloon and her ribs didn’t feel as though she’d taken a kick in the breadbasket…which is what had actually happened so...

That was lame, she thought. Damn, Helena literally punched her stupid. Great, like she needed to lose a few brain cells on top of everything else. Knowing her luck it was probably the good brain cells, too; it couldn’t ever be the bad brain cells like the ones containing the memories of that last movie she rented.

That was an hour and forty-five minutes of her life she was never, ever getting back. She only kept watching it because it was such a train wreck, so utterly awful, that it bordered on mesmerizing. Just when she thought it had gotten as bad as it could possibly get, it just kept getting worse.

Bruce tapped on the glass and held up a towel impatiently.

She glanced over at him and sighed. Her life was quickly turning into a bad action movie…minus the machine gun fire during sex with a hooker although, hey, these days it wasn’t completely outside the realm of possibility.

Yes, this was how far she had fallen.

As soon as she stepped out, he handed her the towel in his hands with a black look. She wrapped it around herself before padding towards the sink to examine her reflection for the first time. “Crap,” she said, touching the cut on her lip tentatively. Yeah, no lipstick for a while either; it was lip balm and Arnica cream from here on out until it healed. Her bruises were in full bloom now and she looked like the poster child for a domestic abuse hotline.

Were she a vain woman she’d be in tears right now. Luckily she was too damn tired to even care. Besides, it wasn’t that bad, really. It looked like crap now but if she took a full pouch of herbs the swelling would be down before she made it back to the office and they’d be all but healed by this time tomorrow, Thursday tops.
Unfortunately her ribs and shoulder might take a bit longer to heal, herbs or no herbs.

“Do you still have those prescription Ibuprofen?” She asked him.

He opened the medicine cabinet with jerky movements, telegraphing his agitation clearly. He snatched the large prescription bottle off the shelf and opened it, handing her a tablet as she filled a glass with water from the sink. “Who did this to you?” He demanded as she swallowed the pill then rolled her shoulder and rubbed it with a wince.

“Helena,” she told him while rummaging in the drawer for some Arnica cream then applied it to her bruised jawline and lip. Hopefully it would help the healing process along a bit. “Don’t worry though; she came out of it with more than a few bruises of her own, I promise. Plus, as a bonus, I nearly snatched her bald so she’s in for a few bad hair days.”

“She attacked you?” He asked and she could see his eyes fill with rage toward the other woman.

“Nope; we just sparred together, that’s all,” she said with an exasperated sigh as she turned to face him. “She just happened to get in a few good licks, but I’m fine, I promise. No real harm done.”

“No harm done?” He glowered at her, “She could have killed you!”

She shrugged, “Yeah, and I could have killed her but we’re both still breathing; what’s your point?”

“Are you insane?” He asked her flatly. “Have you lost your goddamn mind? What the hell did you think you were doing?”

“Kicking Helena Bertinelli’s ass,” she answered roundly. “And, if you ask me, she was way overdue for a good ass kicking, too. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to pee so unless you want to ruin the mystique we have going on between us I suggest you give me some privacy.”

He crossed his arms stubbornly across his chest and glowered at her in response.

“Oh,” she sighed and sat on the pot while he stared at her intently. As she started to tinkle she looked up at him, “You know, you’re lucky I know you well enough that I can tell you’re just really ticked off and not acting like some kind of pervert who’s into watching girls pee, otherwise the way you’re staring at me right now might seem creepy and disturbing.”

Bruce tightened his lips in exasperation and turned to leave, “I’ll be in the bedroom when you’re done.”

“Can you be in the kitchen?” She called out. “There’s soup in the crockpot and I bought sandwich stuff. Feel free to make a few.”

“I’m not hungry,” he said tersely.

“I meant for me,” she told him.

He stared at her incredulously for a moment and she could practically see the steam coming out of his ears as he stomped out of the bathroom wordlessly.

A few minutes later she entered the kitchen in one of Bruce’s deep V-necked silk undershirts and a pair of soft cotton boxers that hung on her petite frame like a loose fitting pair of pajama shorts. She also appropriated another pair of his precious gray wool tartan boot socks that she had to fold down at the top otherwise they would have gone above her knees.
Bruce has really big feet, she thought. How he managed to walk so quietly when he had feet the size of canoes were beyond her.

He looked at her with a perplexed expression on his face as she walked over to the copper kettle on the stove and filled it at the sink.

“What are you doing?” He asked, giving her the once over.

“Making tea,” she told him.

“No, I meant why are you wearing that?” He said, gesturing at her outfit.

“Because every time I put on my own pajamas you jump me and I’m too tired and sore to have angry revenge sex right now,” she told him. “Besides, I only have a couple of hours to eat and take a nap before I have to go back to work, so…” She gestured at her outfit dramatically, “Taa daa! Enjoy it because me wearing your underwear is as close to sex as you’re getting tonight.” She reached for the Ziploc filled with the herbs Diggle had given her, tore one of the pouches open, and shook them into a cup.

“You aren’t going back there and that’s final,” he said firmly, his jaw set and his eyes glittering with anger.

She snorted at him and pointed to the sandwich sitting on the counter, “Is that mine?”

“I mean it, Felicity; you’re never to go anywhere near Stellmoor or Helena Bertinelli ever again!”

She picked up the sandwich and took a huge bite, moaning in pleasure, “Oh my God, this is so good, you have no idea,” she garbled as she chewed. She swallowed and reached into the fridge for a bottle of water, taking a long draught before speaking again. “And the mayo was a nice touch because mustard would have totally burned like a bitch right now.” She paused, “You know, I love mayo on cold cuts but hate it on burgers; why is that? I don’t know; mayo on burgers just seems wrong for some reason.”

He ignored her, “Dick’s got the place staked out and we’ve got someone on the inside so you are going to stay away from Isabel Rochev and anything to do with her organization.”

The kettle began to whistle and she shut off the burner before pouring the steaming hot water over the herbs creating a sludgy greenish-brown witch’s brew that smelled a bit like her brother’s feet after he’d been working out for a while. She wrinkled her nose in distaste as she got a spoon out of the drawer and stirred, “You know, I haven’t had to use this stuff often but no matter how much sugar and cream you add, it still tastes like armpit sweat. I mean, it works, but I’m pretty sure there’s more going on than just some plants and herbs. I almost asked Oliver once but I was scared he’d say it had mystical yak poo in it or something and I just really, really didn’t want to know that. I tried mixing it with Ben and Jerry’s once but it still had a funky aftertaste and that’s just a waste of good ice cream.” She tilted her head back and wrinkled her brow thoughtfully, “It was kind of okay with the coffee ice cream, I guess; it had an old sweat sock meets Chai Latte piquant going for it but I hate Chai Latte’s so--”

“You’re not going back there!” He burst out over her ramble, his hand slamming down on the counter with a bang.

“Calm down, I heard you the first fifty times,” she told him, taking a sip then screwing up her face in distaste and shuddering. “Ugh, the first sip is always the worst. After that it sort of kills your taste buds for a couple of seconds. Okay, bottoms up,” she muttered to herself, taking a second to screw
her courage before drinking the rest down quickly. When she was done she rinsed out the dregs and put it in the dishwasher before heading for the crockpot. “Want some soup?” she asked, reaching in the cabinet for a couple of bowls. “It’s homemade vegetable beef. I used a recipe I found online. It has okra in it. I’ve never cooked with okra before so this should be interesting.”

“What I want is for you to tell me that you won’t go back there again,” he told her tersely.

“Yeah, well, that’s not going to happen,” she said off-handedly, ladling the soup into two bowls before retrieving a couple of spoons.

“Yes, it is!” He ordered.

She set the bowl in front of him and sat down at the bar, “Yeah, no. Sorry. Eat your soup,” she said, gesturing with her spoon before trying a bite of her own. “Mmm, yummy; okra is now on my shopping list from now on. I totally thought it was going to be all slimy but this is actually pretty tasty.”

He ignored the bowl in front of him and stared daggers at her, “Damn it, Felicity; if I have to, I will handcuff you to the bed and lock you in this apartment.”

She looked at him with raised eyebrows, “While normally that would sound very intriguing in an adult fun kind of way, I think we both know that’s not going to happen.”

“The hell it won’t!” He thundered. “You lied to me this morning, you deliberately misled me into thinking you weren’t going to go there, and then I come home to find you covered in bruises because Huntress, the same woman who threatened to shoot you with a crossbow, physically attacked you!”

“First off, I didn’t lie to you,” she paused, “Okay, I sort of lied to you, but only about the timeline. I told you I was going on Wednesday; I just decided to go in a day early instead to avoid this very scene. Secondly, she didn’t attack me; it was just a bit of vigorous sparring between teammates.”

“‘Vigorous sparring between teammates’,” he repeated darkly.

“Yep,” she told him, taking another bite of soup before reaching for her sandwich. “It was a kind of team building exercise; I kicked her ass and she agreed to knock off her crap and start acting like a member of the team instead of a psycho.” She took a crunchy bite and moaned again, “God, I love that you remembered how much I like my pickles on the sandwich and not just on the side. That alone is worth marrying you for.”

He rubbed his hand over his eyes and then over his mouth as though trying very hard to keep his temper in check. “I don’t want you going back there,” he said, obviously putting a lot of effort into not yelling.

“Yeah, well, you’re setting yourself up for disappointment then because I’m going back, so…” She gave him an apologetic smile and took another bite of her sandwich.

He sat down in the chair beside her and turned her toward him, his hands resting on her thighs as he closed his eyes and sighed wearily, “I spent the entire morning in a panic because I couldn’t find you.” He spoke each word with measured intonation, “After I finally tracked you down, I couldn’t do anything other than sit on the top of a building twiddling my thumbs, forced to wonder if you were being tortured or killed while I did nothing because you were in a building surrounded by snipers and I couldn’t get to you.” He opened his eyes and pinned her with his heavy gaze, “You could have been killed; anything could have happened in there and I couldn’t get to you, do you understand that? Anything. Do you even know what I went through today? Do you even care what I
went through today? I was…” he swallowed, “If anything had happened to you…”

“I’m okay,” she told him soothingly, putting her sandwich aside so she could brush his mussed and windblown hair off his forehead.

“No,” he said crossly, moving away from her touch. “Obviously you’re not okay! This,” he said gesturing towards her bruises, “is not okay!”

“Bruce,” she said slowly, “you’re Batman–”

“Don’t!” He warned. “Don’t even try to compare what I do with whatever this is.”

“How is it different?” She asked him.

“It just is!” He said with a scowl. “I don’t want you going back and that’s final!”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” He asked her indignantly. “Because I’m in love with you and I don’t want the woman I plan on marrying getting herself killed, that’s why!”

“What if I said I didn’t want you to be Batman anymore?” She shot back.

He gave her a withering look, “You’re not exactly filling me with confidence, you know that, right?”

“Oh yeah,” she said with a disgruntled frown, “That might not have been the best argument to lead off with.” She shrugged, “I’m tired so I’m not playing with a full deck right now.” She sighed, “Okay, how about this: I know this seems scary to you, I get that, but other than the trained snipers and the one crazy murderous crossbow-wielding psychopath, it’s actually a very nice place to work and completely safe as far as I can tell.” She paused, “Again, with the exception of the, you know, leather-clad trigger-happy psycho-bitch but, honestly, I think I made a lot of headway into burying the hatchet with her today after I totally kicked her ass; notice the emphasis I’m placing on the fact that I ‘kicked her ass’?” She said pointedly, “I realize you’re pissed but the least you could do is give me some kudos on a job well done.”

He stared at her stony-faced, “You’re not exactly filling me with confidence, you know that, right?”

“I have an office with a coffeepot that grinds its own beans and a mini-fridge filled with fancy nibbles and the good cream, Bruce,” she told him. “If they were going to kill me I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t have given me a leather napping couch and a car allowance. Besides,” she said, “being inside means I can run my own investigation into whatever is going on. For example, after just one day in, I’ve already found a few things that might interest both you and Oliver.”

“Like what?” He asked, his eyes sharp.

“Like the fact that they seem to be recruiting masks that are connected in some way to both teams,” she told him. “It might be a coincidence but, so far, they have Sara, Lyla Michaels who happens to be Dig’s ex-wife, Huntress, and Wildcat Grant on the payroll along with a few other masks that I’ve never heard of before but who you might have come across at one time or another.”

“Who?” It was obvious he was still concerned for her well-being and more than a little put out, but she could see the Bat’s curiosity coming to bear.

“Tatsu Yamashiro, codename Katana, and a meta-human by the name of Cynthia Reynolds, codename Gypsy.”
He seemed to absorb that new information for a moment before speaking, “I’m not familiar with Gypsy but I have met Katana. We worked together once when the mission took me to the Baltics. You’re right though, that does seem like a bit more than just a coincidence. Last I heard, she was attached to the Markovian Intelligence Agency.”

“Markovia?” Felicity asked sharply, “As in the tiny little country between France, Belgium and Luxembourg? Markov device Markovia?”

“I’m fairly confident Katana had nothing to do with that,” he said, his anger fading as the Detective in him came out. “Her sense of honor and justice are second to none. I was actually considering recruiting her to lead a team overseas; a kind of expansion of the mission Luke’s doing in Africa only in Europe.” He paused, “If Stellmoor has offices in Europe why bring her here unless they were deliberately trying to get my attention? And why Huntress? How long has she been working for them?”

“I don’t know; not long I think,” she told him. “A few things she said gave me the impression that she’d been recruited fairly recently.”

“How recently?” He asked, his eyes sharp.

“Days maybe, not more than a few weeks for sure. I doubt she was with the Organization when you had your confrontation.”

He nodded slightly, “The only reason I can think of to recruit someone as unstable as Huntress would be her link between the Arrow’s mission and mine, tenuous as it is. If this really is a vigilante organization I could understand why they’d recruit Canary but…” He frowned, “Wildcat called me while you were inside,” he told her. “He didn’t say much but he wants to meet me later this afternoon to talk about this ‘Orbital Organization’ in more detail. Hopefully he might know something about what’s really going on over there.”

“Great, while you do that I’ll go back in and--”

“No.”

“Bruce, I have to go back--!” She began.

“And I told you that there was no way in hell I was letting you go back there,” he said stubbornly, “Wildcat can handle it. He’s damn near immortal; you aren’t.”

“Okay, we need to discuss this whole ‘let’ and ‘allow’ dialog you have going on because that’s just not happening,” she told him blithely. “We’re not doing that, Batman; this is a partnership, not a dictatorship.”

“Fine, then as your future husband, I’m telling you that as my fiancée you aren’t going anywhere near that place again,” he shot back.

“Nice try but marriage and ownership are two very different things and you need to get used to that fact right now.”

He awarded her with a tight and angry smile, “Okay, in that case, this ‘partner’ and this ‘fiancé’ are combining their votes and since my two votes beat out your one, I win,” he told her obstinately. “You aren’t going anywhere and that’s final.”

“You don’t get to decide that for me,” she told him with equal tenacity.
“Wildcat can feed us the information we need and I can get in contact with Katana as well,” he countered. “There’s no reason for you to go back in.”

“Wildcat doesn’t have the kind of access I do and neither does Katana.” Okay, maybe Tatsu did but he didn’t need to know that, “Besides, while he’s planning on meeting with you, Isabel has a surprise recruit coming in this afternoon and, from the way she was talking, I suspect that I’m really going to want to be there for the big reveal. Also, Sara is going to be there in a few hours and I can’t leave her hanging,” she told him. “I’m going in, Bruce; you can help me or you can get out of my way, but you can’t stop me.”

He seemed to struggle with that for a moment, “I can’t pull you out if you get in trouble, you realize that, don’t you? You’d be completely exposed in there.”

“Sara will be there and when she isn’t, Wildcat will be my back up; you trust him, right?”

“I don’t trust anyone when it comes to you,” he told her. “Half the time I don’t even trust myself since you’ve got me so goddamn confused and pissed off half the time that I can barely even function anymore.” He shook his head and grimaced, “You drive me completely insane, you know that?”

Her gaze softened, “I have to do this, Bruce.”

He expelled a harsh breath, “I don’t like this; not any of it.”

And just like that, she knew she had won. While Bruce hated the idea of her being in danger, the Bat in him knew she was his best chance of getting the answers they needed. Still…

“Bruce, you’re going to have to get over the idea that I’m still just ‘Baby from the Batcave’; I’m not that girl anymore,” she told him. “I haven’t been her in a very long time and I’m not ever going to be her again. I love you, but you can’t force me to be the person you want me to be just because you’re scared or you want to protect me. I love that you want that, but—” She dropped her eyes, her brow furrowed in consternation, “I wish I could be that version of myself again sometimes; the kind of girl who waited patiently for the hero to save the day, confident in the fact that they always would. In some ways it would be a lot easier, but that’s not who I am anymore; in fact, in case you haven’t been paying attention, I don’t think I ever really was that girl.” She looked up at him, her face open and sincere, “I need you Bruce, but I don’t need you to be my hero. I can be my own hero most of the time, I just need a partner when I do and a hand to hold when I can’t, okay?”

He scowled, but the heat had gone out of his eyes to be replaced by loving concern and trepidation instead. “If I agree to let you go back in there then all hell is going to break loose, I hope you realize that,” he told her in a more subdued tone, his expression more Bruce than Bat. “Dick will…hell, they’ll all want to kick my ass. Can’t say I’d blame them,” he sighed. “I’m guessing after what happened this morning that Queen and Luke are on their way; in fact, it wouldn’t surprise me if his whole team showed up on my doorstep. I hope Queen isn’t stupid enough to leave his territory wide-open like that considering how much League activity he’s been having but when it comes to you I think most of us tend to find ourselves behaving irrationally.”

She looked at him askance, “I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not.”

“In this case, not,” he said dryly. He ran his fingers through his hair and gave her a longsuffering look, “You know what I really hate right now; besides this entire situation? I hate that I can’t…God, you piss me off so much,” he said, exhaling a pent up breath.

“I’ll deal with Oliver and Luke, don’t worry about it,” she told him sympathetically as she patted his
He glowered at her, “Don’t…just don’t,” he told her. “Don’t do this.” He gestured between them. “Just let me be pissed off, okay?”

“Oh, got it,” she nodded and picked up her spoon again. “You should eat your soup before it gets cold.”

He turned in his chair and picked up the spoon, stirring it in a disgruntled manner without eating. “And I don’t want you going anywhere near Queen either,” he said peevishly.

She looked at him, “Why not?”

He gave her a dirty look, “Because he told me he intends to ‘rescue you’ from me.” He scowled, “That son of a bitch thinks he can just come into my city and take you back to Starling as if he has every right to.”

“Gee, I wonder where he could have ever gotten the idea to do something like that,” she said under her breath.

Bruce looked decidedly unamused, “You realize that Luke is on the warpath as well, right? In addition to dealing with that idiot Queen, and this Orbital situation, I’m going to be stuck doing damage control with your father after he talks to him.”

She cringed, “That reminds me, did you talk to dad this morning about us getting married?”

“No, I kind of had my morning plans disrupted by the fact that my supposed fiancée went off half-cocked and nearly got herself killed,” he told her irritably, poking at the vegetables in his bowl sharply with his spoon.

“Oh good,” she breathed. “Don’t.”

He eyed her suspiciously, “Why not?”

“Because I’m apparently a lesbian now and I can’t exactly be in a relationship with you and be gay, can I?” She said off-handedly. She paused, “I suppose I could be, but I was pretty adamant about the fact that I was only into girls. I guess I could be bi but then I couldn’t exactly date Isabel and be marrying you at the same time…”

“What?!” He exploded.

“Oh relax,” she said waving him off. “It’s just part of my cover. I’m kind of dating Isabel while Sara and I are pretending to be involved in some kind of angsty lesbian soap opera break-up.”

A vein was noticeably throbbing in his temple as he spoke, “What do you mean you’re ‘kind of’ dating Isabel?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “She wanted to have sex with me and I told her that I only do relationships so she offered to wine and dine me a little.”

Bruce tilted his head back, eyes shut, and ran both hands over his hair before cupping the back of his neck and clenching his jaw in an expression of extreme agitation.

“You okay?” She asked.

“Don’t talk to me,” he told her without looking at her. “Just don’t speak.”
“Okay,” she shrugged and continued to eat her soup.

A minute or two ticked by during which she had time to finish her soup and take several more bites of her sandwich before he spoke again.

“Let me get this straight,” he said slowly. “You’re ‘dating’ Isabel Rochev; a woman who we suspect is dangerous and who is quite possibly a threat to both Queen and to you personally.”

“Yeah,” she said, munching on her sandwich.

“And this woman wants to have sex with you,” he said in the same measured tones.

“Oh yeah,” she nodded. “Plus, I’m pretty sure she’s into stuff like leather and chains, she just seems the type and, the other day, she told me how she’s into all into these totally hedonistic orgies, so… yeah, she wants to fly me to the moon and back. Watching me kick Helena’s leather clad butt turned her on so much that she offered to crack open a case of wine with me before popping my cork later.”

He stared at her blank faced, not saying a word.

“What?” She garbled around a bite of her sandwich. “I’m not actually going to do it.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and continued to eye her in complete silence.

“I mean I’m not going to have sex with her,” she clarified. “I will however let her wine and dine me if for no other reason than to actually get to experience being wined and dined at least once. And by that I mean by someone who finds me attractive and not just using me in order to get closer to someone else.” She cut her eyes at him, “And before you bring up that lunch we had after we had sex in your office; it doesn’t count as being ‘wined and dined’ if A) you had the sex part of the evening first and B) it’s just catching a quick lunch on the fly followed by a bunch of yelling; ‘wining and dining’ means dinner, wine, and maybe some dancing or something afterwards.”

“You’re going dancing with Isabel Rochev,” he repeated slowly and through gritted teeth.

“Maybe,” she contemplated that for a moment. “That might actually be kind of fun. I’ve never gone dancing before and I bet Isabel is a great at that kind of stuff. She has a dancer’s physique so, yeah, here’s hoping!” She said enthusiastically as she munched on a pickle slice. “Oh man, I hope she takes me to someplace classy like The Rainbow Room or Upstairs at the Kimberly.” She heaved a wistful sigh, “I’ve always wanted to go there and dance in someone’s arms under the twinkling lights just like Fred and Ginger…only this would be more Ginger and Ginger, I guess. Or Ginger and Eleanor Powell since she’s a brunette. Oh! Maybe a smoky jazz club! I--”

“You’re planning on going on a romantic date with Isabel Rochev? You want to go dancing with Isabel Rochev?” He said irately.

She raised her eyebrow at him, “If the idea of me going on a romantic date with Isabel bothers you so much I could suggest we go to Carousel instead,” she told him. “You could glare at her from the next table if she gets too handsy.” She frowned, “They have dancing there, right? Eh, that could work, I guess. Food’s kind of of blah but I could deal.” She looked at his thunderous expression and rolled her eyes at him, “Don’t get all huffy about it; I’m not planning on ‘date’ dating her, just ‘dating’ her.”

“‘Just’ dating her,” he repeated harshly. “You plan on ‘just’ dating a potential threat while hiding the fact that you’re actually involved with me. You want to go on a romantic date with a sexually aggressive and potentially dangerous woman who wants to, quote ‘fly you to the moon and back,’ end quote?”
“Pretty much, yeah,” she told him then winced, “Oh crap.”

“What now?” He asked acerbically, stabbing at his vegetables even more vengefully than before. “Forget to pick your favorite dancing dress up from the drycleaners for your ‘date’ not ‘date-date’ with Isabel later?”

“I know that was sarcasm but now you’ve got me wondering what I should wear…” She quirked her head to the side to run through her options. She really wanted to wear something comfortable like slacks. A dress would be better for dancing in but a pantsuit would cover more and bruises and dresses didn’t go together as well as bruises and pants. Which, when you thought about it, was weird but still kind of true.

Her mind tripped over all the possibilities she had on hand. Well, there was that suit Tam gave her with the sequined jacket. No, too magician’s assistant. Ooh, there was that Gucci jumpsuit she found the other day even though it was really low cut and backless. She couldn’t wear a bra with it but the one perk of being less than abundant up top was that she could do that and get away with it…oh, then there was that sparkly Armani thing she bought a few weeks ago. The one with the belt and the flare legged pants. It would be warmer but if she was going for sexy the ivory jumpsuit would be better. Then again, if they did go dancing, all the crystal embellishments on the Armani would be so pretty under the lights…

“What?!” Bruce snapped, startling her out of her reverie.

“Hmm?” She said jumping slightly in surprise.

“You said ‘oh crap’; what?” He bit out.

“Oh, just that I still haven’t cancelled my date with Jake yet,” she told him. “I can’t exactly date him and Isabel at the same time either.”

He dropped his spoon with a clatter and turned to her with a livid expression that would probably have the most hardened of criminals wetting their pants. “You haven’t cancelled your plans with the security guard yet?”

She blinked at him, “It slipped my mind.”

He pushed away from the table and got up to head out of the room.

“You’re leaving?” She asked him.

“Yes,” he told her turning to pin her with his fiery gaze, the volume of his voice starting off at a near conversational level but growing louder with every passing moment. “I’m leaving. I am going to talk to Wildcat and then, after I’ve cooled off, I will discuss this with you further. Until then, I dearly hope to run into Queen so that I can vent my anger with you and this plan of yours into something constructive like beating him into bloody pulp since it’s his fault for mismanaging his company to the point that Isabel Rochev ever came into the picture in the first place! So yes: to answer your question, yes; I’m leaving! And then, when I’m done, I’m calling DioGuardi and having that damn security guard transferred out of state immediately!”

She wrinkled her nose at him, “Don’t you think you’re overreacting just a little bit?”

“No! No, I don’t!” he told her. “Overreacting would be sending him to fucking moon, but since we don’t have offices on the moon my options are kind of limited! In fact, if I could, I’d send Isabel Rochev with him!”
“I don’t think he’s her type,” she offered with raised eyebrows. “Then again, I’m not sure Isabel really has a ‘type’ per se, she’s more of a ‘all you can eat buffet’ kind of girl.”

Bruce’s face actually turned red at that point; not a blush, the kind of red that, were he a cartoon, would be accompanied by smoke erupting from his ears, “I do not find any of this amusing; the fact that you seem to think that I would…” he clenched his jaw, reaching for a rail on the bar stool and squeezing until his knuckles turned white.

“Okay, whatever,” she snorted. “Why you are taking this so seriously, I have no idea. I mean, it’s not like I’m actually planning on putting out or anything even if she does take me dancing. The furthest I was planning to let her go with me is first base. Maybe second if she springs for the good wine, but…wait? Is first base French kissing or is that second? Oh, okay, so if tongue kissing is first then second is boob action over the clothes, right?” She paused to contemplate that for a moment, “Okay, well, definitely first but I’ll really have to think about it long and hard before I let her get to second. I mean, I know I’m trying to get close to her and all but there’s a difference between gathering intel and leading someone on. I mean, I wouldn’t want her to think I’m a tease or anything--”

And with that Bruce turned on his heel and left.

She stared after him and jumped slightly when she heard the door slam. “Ouch, I guess he really was mad, huh?”

She shrugged and continued eating her soup when suddenly he strode back in the room and took the spoon from her hands. Before she could say anything, he grasped her face in his hands, tilted her head up, and kissed her.

His lips glided over hers in a way that was both gentle yet thorough, possessive yet yielding, as he carefully avoided abrading the cut on her bottom lip further. His thumbs stoked her cheekbones as her still damp hair clung to his fingers and when he pulled away, it took her a moment to open her eyes as her body was still singing from his touch. “Wow,” she breathed.

“I’m still pissed,” he told her, the anger still very much present in his tone despite his gentle touch.

“Okay,” she said slowly.

He scowled at her, “I’m extremely angry with you right now, in fact.”

“Got it,” she nodded.

“I will not be getting over this anytime soon and when I have calmed down sufficiently we will be having a lengthy discussion about this; one in which I do the majority of the talking and to which you will listen to everything I have to say without interruption.”

“You bet,” she swallowed.

“And when that's done, you and I are going to have another very long and serious discussion about a few other things I learned after speaking with Queen and the rest of his team this morning.”

“Sure.”

“And finally,” he bowed his head until his lips nearly touched her ear, speaking in a deep timbre that made shivers run down her spine, “when all of *that* is done and I’ve said everything I need to say on both matters, we will take this into the bedroom where we will engage in several extended sessions of very ‘angry revenge sex’ during which, not only will you forget Isabel Rochev’s name,
but you’ll forget your own as well, am I understood?”

“Gotcha,” she flushed.

“Fine,” he said stiffly before turning on his heel and heading out of the room leaving her to stare after him.

She picked her spoon back up, slid Bruce's untouched bowl of soup in front of her, and muttered, “Well, Isabel really has her work cut out for her if she’s going to try to top that.”

Bruce pulled the collar of his pea coat up against the bitterly cold wind as it picked up and glared at the carved wooden plaque of a cast iron cauldron filled with gold coins and green shamrocks that hung above the door.

“Goddamn it,” he muttered. Wildcat always did have a perverse sense of humor.

He clenched his jaw as he entered the pub, the words ‘Céad Míle Fáilte’ in chipped gold lettering welcoming him in. Even in the middle of the afternoon there were plenty of people packed inside, several of whom he recognized, most of whom were nursing pints of black lager and frothy mugs of beer as they watched a rugby game on the large flat screen on the wall. As he neared the bar the room erupted in hisses and jeers as Wales took the advantage over Ireland.

One of the patrons nearest the bar shouted out, “Tha’s a lot of shite tha’ is! Feisigh do thoin fein!” He shouted at the television to a rousing round of catcalls by the other patrons.

“Aye! Feckin’ Gobshite! Made a right bags of that call, bloody eejit!” The bartender cursed the referee on the screen before turning to Bruce, “What’ll yah have?”

“Give us a pint o’ plain,” he told him, tossing down a tenner. “Whatever’s on tap.”

“Guinness, Kilkenny, or Murphy’s?”

“Murphy’s.”

The barman filled a frosted mug for him then scooped up the bill as he placed it in front of him.

“Gura mile,” he told him. “Keep the change. Is Wildcat here?” Bruce asked, allowing a slightly lilting feigned Irish accent to color his tone.

“You one of his fighters?” He asked looking him over suspiciously.

“From time to time,” he answered coolly.

“Getting a bit long in the tooth for that sort of sport, eh there hard man?” He shot back.

“I make do,” Bruce said coldly.

“In da back, near the bog,” he returned with a dismissive sneer.

Bruce made his way to the back of the bar where Wildcat was nursing a pint of Guinness. As he neared the booth he caught sight of his companion, “Katana.”

“Hello Bruce,” she greeted him familiarly although her expression remained cool and professional as always.
He slipped in beside her, pinning a grinning Wildcat with a hard glare, “The Cauldron?”

“Your fiancée inspired me, what can I say?” He smirked.

“My fiancée inspired you to meet me at an Irish Mob bar?” He asked witheringly.

“She brought up the ‘Matches Malone’ thing so I figured, ‘what the hell’,” he chuckled. “Sides, they don’t exactly ask questions here and it tends to be pretty quiet this time of day. If I’d known you were gonna get all snotty about it I coulda suggested Finnegan’s but given the circumstances a mob bar seemed more appropriate than a cop bar for us to discuss.”

“And what are we discussing?” He asked him.

“The fact that somethin’ ain’t right about this Orbital Organization,” he told him flatly.

“What do you know?” He asked, placing his beer in front of him and wrapping his fingers around it so that it would appear that they were just old friends enjoying a drink should anyone get curious.

“Not much,” Wildcat admitted. “It’s mostly just a gut feelin’ so far and a lot of little things but they’re startin’ to add up.”

He eyed him carefully, “For instance?”

“The place has been open a few months now and they keep bringin’ in these new ‘in-house recruits’ then shipping them right back out again,” he told him. “They don’t go on any of the missions they send the rest of their regular operators on neither. I don’t know what the hell is goin’ on but something is fishy, that’s for damn sure.”

“Not to say I’m doubting you but I need a bit more to go on than just your gut,” he told him.

“There’s more,” Katana said quietly. “These recruits they keep bringing in for training; they appear almost mechanical. When they’re training they respond with deadly accuracy but something about their behavior is just…off,” she said, pausing with a frown.

“They don’t talk for one,” Wildcat contributed. “They’ve got their own trainers and handlers but I tried striking up a conversation with one and she just looked right through me like I wasn’t even there.”

“You sure it wasn’t just your winning personality that put her off?” Bruce asked with wry sarcasm.

“Watch it, kid,” he told him. “I may be an old man but I can still kick your sorry ass. And naw, it’s like they’re zombies or somethin’.”

“Zombies?” He said dryly.

“I concur with Wildcat,” Tatsu told him. “There is something definitely wrong there.”

“Why didn’t Felicity mention any of this?” He asked.

“They aren’t a constant presence and there haven’t been any new ‘recruits’ for a week or so, but there’s more.” Tatsu told, her normally stoic expression troubled, “When Miranda recruited me—”

Bruce stopped her, “Miranda?”

“Miranda Tate; she runs the Orbital Organization,” she explained.
Bruce frowned, “I thought Felicity said that Isabel Rochev ran Orbital.”

“Izabel is in upper management but Miranda is the one in charge,” she explained.

He nodded, filing that information away, “Go on.”

“Anyway, when Miranda recruited me she said she did so because of my experience in dealing with the Yakuza as Orbital was concerned mostly with dealing with organized crime syndicates, specifically those who engaged in human trafficking. I was hired as a field operative but, until Felicity was ready to come on board, they wanted me to act as the Interim Director due to my years with Markovian Intelligence. Even as Interim Director though, I was not allowed access to any of these so-called ‘recruit’s’ files which I found incredibly strange. When I asked they first said that it was probably a computer glitch given that the systems were fairly new but, later, I was told that because these soldiers were being trained for a special covert assignment that their files were sealed. The only person with access was Miranda herself. After I began to ask questions, she came to me personally and explained that because ARGUS’s security had recently been compromised at the highest levels keeping that information on a need to know basis was a necessary precaution. This led me to believe that perhaps the OO was planning on making a move against the shadow group calling themselves HIVE that was rumored to be responsible for that breach. That being the case, I couldn’t see fault with her logic; at least, not at the time.”

She paused, her eyes troubled, “I’d had some run-ins with HIVE in the past myself, and by run-ins I mean I’ve interviewed witnesses of HIVE’s tactics, and rarely do they leave people alive and with their memories intact so her reasoning seemed logical. Whoever this group is, they use some sort of mind control in order to access information from their captives then have them reconned so it made sense to keep that information well-guarded. Miranda is constantly on the move and surrounded by security while operators like myself are often sent into the field and could be more easily captured. Still, something about her explanation bothered me. Never once have I seen any evidence that the OO was investigating anything to do with HIVE. I launched my own investigation and discovered that these special recruits were being brought in from some island and then moved to various OO posts throughout the globe as, quote, ‘ground forces’, but for what reason other than this supposed HIVE operation I have no idea.”

“You said they were being brought in from an island; what island?” Bruce asked. “And is that all of these shadow recruits or just some of them?”

“All of them from what I can tell but, like Wildcat said, they only speak to their handlers and trainers, no one else, not even each other,” Tatsu told him. “They remain completely silent until spoken to directly and never break ranks, not even during meals. I’ve seen Special Forces operatives with less self-discipline.”

“And they’re all women, not a man in the bunch,” Wildcat added. “The OO is mostly women anyway but you’d think that there would be at least a few men in their group, right? I asked Lyla about it since she was the one flying them in—”

“Lyla?” Bruce interjected. “Lyla Michaels?” Like Felicity said, yet another piece of the puzzle connecting their two teams to Orbital.

“Yes; she’s a former ARGUS agent who joined Orbital around the same time I did,” Katana explained. “She goes by the handle ‘Lady Blackhawk’ and acts primarily as our mission pilot and field support. She said that Miranda has her touch down on an airstrip located somewhere around the Bermuda Triangle on an island that is shielded so well she can’t even get a visual on it until she’s practically on top of it. It has some kind of cloaking field hiding it from sight and the only way she can get there is by using a specially designed shielded GPS otherwise the magnetic field surrounding
the area would have her crashing into the ocean.”

“It should still show up on satellite surveillance though,” Bruce pointed out. “Whatever shielding they have might affect her equipment but it would still be visible from space.”

“It isn’t,” she told him. “I thought the same thing, I even asked one of my contacts to send me sat images and scans of the area based on the last GPS coordinates given to Lyla and nothing; it was like it was completely invisible.”

Bruce shook his head, “That’s impossible.”

“Perhaps, but I had it checked and double-checked and still nothing.”

Wildcat nodded, “It’s freakin’ bizarre, that’s for sure, and it’s a pretty rough ride getting there and back to boot. According to Lyla, if she wasn’t such a damn good pilot she said the first time she went there she would have been toast.”

“Another thing that’s odd about the island’s location is that it seems to change for some reason,” Katana added. “It’s always the same island, the same amount of passengers, but always different GPS coordinates as though the island moves on its own.”

Bruce adopted an air of skepticism, “She did say that there was some kind of magnetic disturbance in the area; it seems a more logical explanation would be that it’s caused by mechanical failure or a problem with her instruments rather than automatically assuming that the island is somehow moving on its own.”

“No,” Tatsu said, “I asked the same thing but Lyla insists the island is never in the same place twice. She checked against her fuel levels, flight times; it’s always different and not by a little bit either. Sometimes her flight times vary by hours.”

“Pilot error then?” He offered.

“Kid, if you ever met Lyla you’d know that there is no way she’d ever make an error like that. That gal is razor sharp,” Wildcat said wryly.

Tatsu nodded in agreement, “Furthermore, it’s always surrounded by some kind of tropical cyclone that appears before she breeches the island’s airspace then seemingly disappears afterwards. There is nothing on her instruments to indicate it exists, even though it obviously does. When she lands there’s not even a breeze and completely blue skies above with no sign of any storms until after she takes off again.”

That made him pause, “Some kind of holographic image combined with magnetic shielding perhaps? Still, I’ve never heard of that type of technology being used on that grand of a scale before, have you?”

“Never,” Tatsu told him.

“Even if you’re right and it’s just some kind of fancy projection, it’s still weird,” Wildcat told him, “Not only don’t these dames not say anything but they’re strong; damn strong, we’re talking meta-human strong. All they do is train, eat, sleep, and take shifts on guard duty; never saying a goddamn word to anyone except the techs assigned to their group and the medical staff and even then it’s only when spoken to directly. The only time I ever heard any of ‘em speak was to say either ‘yes’ or ‘no’.”

“Medical staff?”
Tatsu nodded, “More like lab technicians really, but yes. Every time a new group comes in they take blood draws then put them through their paces for several days before they’re shipped off again. And then there are our assignments.”

“What do you mean?” Bruce asked.

“On the surface Orbital, despite being incredibly secretive over the role of the Amazons—“

“Amazons?” Bruce interjected dubiously.

“Wildcat calls them that,” she said, not rolling her eyes but coming close.

“It’s what I overheard one of the handlers call ‘em once so I told Tatsu about it,” Wildcat explained. “Seemed to suit ‘em actually. They all look like a bunch of really buff supermodel fem-bots or somethin’.”

“Supermodel fem-bots,” Bruce repeated with a withering look.

“I’m telling ya; every damn one of them is built like a brick shit house and could crack a man’s back just by wrappin’ their thighs around him.” He grinned, “Ya gotta admit, it’d be a hell of a way ta go.”

Tatsu cleared her throat as Bruce eyed Wildcat disparagingly, “As I was saying, they’re doing good work but something is… I don’t know, just off about it. Their primary focus lies in disrupting organized crime globally, League installations and operations, and human trafficking; the types of operations and organizations that are notoriously difficult to track because they’re constantly changing locations and enshrouded in secrecy with almost impenetrable security but their intelligence is always spot on. Too spot on.”

“What do you mean, ‘too spot on’?” Bruce asked.

“Bruce, you told me once that you briefly worked with Interpol before you began your mission here in Gotham; you know that intelligence gathering, no matter how good your sources or technology, always comes with a certain amount of guesswork and wiggle room. Orbital puts itself in direct competition with ARGUS who, despite having access to more military and government resources than probably any other covert ops group in the world, always seems two steps behind,” she told him. “If it was just one group we were targeting I’d say Miranda had a well-placed mole but it’s as though the OO has the inside handle on everything that’s going on right down to which file cabinets to look inside and where the targets are going to be before even they know themselves.”

“Are you sure you’re just not seeing things that aren’t there?” Bruce asked. “Not that I doubt your instincts but that just seems like you’re hearing zebras instead of horses.”

“I know, but Occam’s Razor is a principle of parsimony and one can only ignore just so many coincidences before the razor begins to cut in the other direction,” she told him. “During my last field assignment we broke up a globally-based human trafficking ring. The ring was conducting online and live auctions in six different locations throughout Europe, Russia, and Asia simultaneously so timing had to be exact. I was with the group sent to the Czech Republic where I apprehended one of their ring leaders who was trying to escape.”

Tatsu’s mouth tightened in consternation, “He was shocked that we were waiting for him at the private air strip when he touched down because they’d only just decided which safe house to use after they took off and were already in flight even though we had been informed of their exact escape route several hours before we raided the facility.”
“Could it have been the pilot who tipped off the Organization?” He suggested.

“It could have been if it weren’t for the fact that the person piloting the plane was the man we were sent to apprehend in the first place,” Tatsu told him. “Also, how did they know he would be the one man to escape the raid? My other theory would be to say it was just a lucky guess on the part of the informant but every single time without fail?”

“How many times has this happened so far?” Bruce asked, a feeling of apprehension curling in his stomach.

“Over the last three months?” She seemed to consider it, “At least a half-dozen times or so, I’d say.”

“That does sound--,” he stopped and his eyes locked on hers, “Did you say three months?”

“That’s how long I’ve been with the Organization,” Tatsu told him. “They hired me just after the Gotham facility first opened.”

“You said they hired you to be the Interim Director.”

“Until Felicity was ready to accept the position, yes,” she agreed.

“Did they say until Felicity was ready to come on board or just some other candidate?”

“Felicity,” she told him, curiosity bleeding through in her tone. “Why do you ask?”

“Felicity has only known about Orbital for a few weeks,” Bruce told her, the shadow of the Bat creeping into his tone.

Tatsu’s expression betrayed a hint of surprise, “Perhaps they were investigating her first before deciding to approach her?”

“I don’t think so,” he said darkly. “I’m pulling her out,” Bruce said mostly to himself. “Whatever is going on, Felicity doesn’t need to be a part of it.”

“Hang on there, kid,” Wildcat said, stopping him. “I get how your first instinct would be to try and protect your girlfriend, but I can tell you that, after seeing her in action today, she can handle herself just fine.”

Bruce glared at the older man, “About that; Huntress could have killed her,” he bit out. “What the hell were you thinking when you allowed her get in the ring with someone like Helena Bertinelli?”

“Just hang on there, Bruce, I didn’t ‘allow’ nothin’; even before she dropped your name I was trying to come up with a way to get her out of it,” the older man told him. “Now, I’ll admit, I was sweatin’ bullets for a minute or two. All I could think was, ‘Helena is gonna tear this pretty little blonde gal to pieces,’ but damn if she didn’t prove me wrong. In fact, that little sweetheart of yours completely outclassed her and Helena ain’t exactly a pushover. By the time she was done with her I was more worried about what she was going to do to Helena than what Helena was going to do to her. The only two women I’ve ever seen that could have done better is maybe Katana here or Selina.”

“Selina and Katana are both trained operatives,” Bruce told him with tightly reined in anger, “Felicity is a tech; the only field experience she has is as a decoy or what she’s learned from sitting behind a monitor!”

“She might be a tech but she’s a tech with a helluva right hook,” he scoffed. “That girl kicked Huntress’s ass sideways then backed her down with pure attitude afterwards.”
“He’s right,” Katana told him, “Felicity is obviously a skilled fighter but, more importantly, Miranda is giving her the opportunity to join the board that governs Orbital. She would have access to the information we don’t so long as she’s able to stick it out through the probationary period. Right now she has the same limits on her access to the system I do as Interim, but once she’s officially made Director and given full clearance she can access 100% of the files and get us the answers we need.”

“You could try hacking their files,” Bruce told them. “Felicity can help you with that without putting herself in the line of fire.”

“You don’t think we’ve already thought of that?” Wildcat’s eyes skimmed over Bruce’s expression, “Katana here is pretty handy with a keyboard plus we got a little gal who’s pretty handy with that sort of thing herself right there in the facility and she couldn’t do it without setting every damn alarm off in the place. Look kid, I get it. If you want to pull her out then, fine. Nobody here is gonna give you shit over trying to take care of your woman, especially if you think she can’t handle it, but somethin’ is goin’ on here and she’s our best shot at figuring it out. Plus,” he said with a sharp mien, “do you really want these folks squattin’ in your backyard without knowin’ what the hell it is they’re up to?”

Bruce tightened his fingers around his glass, Wildcat was right; the last thing he wanted was for Felicity to be placed in a potentially dangerous situation but he had no other option. He grimaced, the lines bracketing his mouth deepening in displeasure, “I’ll need you to stay as close to her as possible at all times. Like I said, Felicity isn’t a trained operator—”

“Coulda fooled me,” Wildcat snorted.

Bruce pinned him with his steely gaze, “If anything happens to her in there I’m holding you personally responsible.”

“I’ve been doin’ this shit since your granddaddy was spoonin’ with your grandma in the backseat and your daddy was just a twinkle in the old man’s eye. I even had a hand in training you, remember?” Wildcat assured him with his own hard look. “I’ve got her back. I might even have her front if she ever gets tired of your sorry mug.”

“You’re not her type,” Bruce said unamused.

“I’m everybody’s type,” he said, his countenance dissolving into an easy grin. “I might have belly button lint older than that pretty little thing but there ain’t no Rogaine in the propane yet, son. I might just make my play and give you a run for your money if you keep pissin’ me off, so watch it.”

“She’s twenty-three,” he said cuttingly.

“And your point is?” Wildcat said with a leer.

Katana sighed and shook her head at the older man’s antics, “There aren’t many operators on staff as of yet since the facility is fairly new but I think I can trust most of them to help us on this and I know all of them will help Felicity in any way they can. Canary and Lyla certainly will since I believe they’re already well-acquainted, Gypsy who is fairly new to this type of work but who I’m confident is trustworthy, and myself of course. The only two I’m uncertain of is Huntress, for obvious reasons, and the new recruit being brought in later today who I’ve yet to meet.”

“Who’s the new recruit?” Bruce asked, remembering what Felicity had told him earlier.

“A West Coast vigilante who goes by the handle, ‘Manhunter’, I believe.”
Bruce stayed behind at the table after Tatsu and Wildcat left pretending to nurse his beer. He didn’t want to be seen leaving with them in case they had a tail and, even dressed as he was, he might still be recognized.

Just thinking about this entire situation had him clenching his teeth together so hard his molars had begun to ache. He was…beyond livid over all of this.

He was irritated by the fact that this ‘Miranda Tate’ had somehow slipped under his radar and opened the doors to her organization right under his nose.

He was fuming over the fact that they had purposefully targeted Felicity for what was apparently months and that neither he nor Queen had any idea it was happening.

He was enraged by the fact that Queen, after so thoroughly botching things up in his own city and company, apparently intended to come to Gotham because he thought Bruce had failed in his own duties as this city’s guardian.

And he was beyond words over the revelation that Felicity had been forced in a life or death situation taking down a man that he and Dick, even working together as a team, couldn’t.

And most of it was Queen’s fault. He was so beyond pissed over that last bit that he couldn’t even talk to her about it yet; not until he’d had time to process it.

Mostly though, he was annoyed at himself for agreeing to allow Felicity to remain undercover even though the idea terrified him. He hadn’t felt this helpless since he had fallen into a cave as a young boy and had to scream for what seemed like hours until his father and Alfred found him.

As he lay there clutching his broken arm, he thought he was going to die as the beady stares and flutters of bat wings surrounded him. He couldn’t even stand to sleep in the dark for years following that incident and carried a phobia of bats well into his adulthood before finally owning his fears and turning them to his advantage. There would be no getting over this though, he thought. The terror he was feeling would never leave him as long as her life was in danger because…he loved her; more than he had ever loved anyone in his entire life. The idea of losing Felicity made him feel like that boy again and he resented the hell out of it so, yes, he was infuriated with her as well.

His hand tightened on the glass in front of him once more. This; this sick feeling in the pit of his stomach was the reason he’d never allowed any woman to get this close before and why he had pushed her away time and time again. Love left you vulnerable, it was a weakness that could be all too easily exploited, and now it was going to get her killed because it was his fault that all this was happening. His and Queen’s, he corrected. They were obviously the ones being targeted and Felicity had somehow been identified as the one person who had connections to both of them. But how? How did they know about her links to his mission? How did they know about his mission at all?

It couldn’t just be because of his connection to Lucius, could it? Doubtful, he thought. It wouldn’t make sense for anyone to assume that just because she was the daughter of his company’s CEO that they had a personal relationship. He and Felicity had never told anyone outside of their small group about their relationship; none of whom would ever talk to anyone outside of the mission. They never so much as went out publically with the exception of the one time they had lunch together, during which they sat in almost complete silence. There had been no obvious PDA, they never even held hands at the table; they didn’t even stay for dessert. They merely ate their meal in companionable silence and left. He could say that it had to do with the meeting he’d gone to at Queen Consolidated; perhaps Rochev had picked up on their obvious tension and decided to exploit it but, if Tatsu was correct, this move of theirs to bring in Felicity had been in the planning stages for months, but why?
The only logical conclusion was that he and Queen were both being targeted but, for what reason, he had no idea. Why draw both teams together like this? Other than Felicity, the Bat and the Arrow had no other common links that he knew of. If they were going after Queen then why draw him into it by bringing in Tatsu and Wildcat? If they were going after him then why bring in Canary and the other connections Queen had made in Starling City? What was their end game? None of it made any sense.

Perhaps they had a shared enemy in common? He’d have to ask Queen when he got there but, for now, the further they got into this mystery the less he was sure of. His only option at this point was one he wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about; he needed to join forces with Queen, since this was obviously connected to both of their missions, and enlist his help in piecing all of it together as Felicity continued to investigate from the inside.

He looked down at the beer in his fist and grimaced as he pretended to take another sip. The smell of it along with the roiling emotions in his gut was turning his stomach. In just the last few hours he felt as though he’d aged twenty years. No more, he decided. As soon as this was done he vowed that he would spend the rest of his life keeping Felicity as far away from all of this as he could because there was no way in hell he was ever going through this shit again. As soon as all this was done then so was Felicity’s involvement with the mission he promised himself silently. He’d speak to Lucius, they’d get married, and then he’d officially hand over the cowl to Dick permanently. He would agree to remain involved with the mission in a limited capacity but, for the most part, he was done being the Batman. After this his main focus would be on expanding the mission globally, running Wayne Enterprises, and starting a family with Felicity.

For the first time he found himself glad was that Selina had decided to leave for Europe. If she were still in Gotham she’d probably find the fact that he had been reduced to a nervous lovesick wreck hilarious. The fact that it was over a girl half his age and that he actually asked her to marry him would have just been the cherry on top as far as she was concerned.

“Fuck,” he muttered. He could practically hear her tinkling laughter echoing all around him.

‘What’s the matter, tiger?’ She’d say, ‘Looks like someone got caught by their tail, huh?’

He’d been caught all right, he thought ruefully.

“Damn it,” he muttered, again bringing the dark colored beer to his mouth and resisted the urge to recoil from the taste as it touched his lips. HIVE, ARGUS, Orbital—what was the link? What was he missing? And why target the Batman and the Arrow specifically? Why Felicity? Why? What did they all have in common?

His phone vibrated and he glanced at it before picking up, “Yes?”

“Got a minute to talk?” Tim asked, his voice strained.

“What’s wrong?” Bruce asked sharply, his focus switching entirely on the young man on the other end of the line. “Has something happened?”

“No,” he said quickly. “No, it’s actually pretty well in hand down here. Um, it’s about Felicity…”

“She’s fine; for now at least,” Bruce told him, relaxing slightly. “I’ll brief you on the details later but she’s at the penthouse resting at the moment. I assume Queen is on the way?”

“Yeah, he took off a few hours ago on one of the Wayne Gulfstreams with Luke so he should be there pretty soon,” Tim told him. “Look, I’m glad Felicity is fine but that’s not why I called.”
“What is it?” Bruce asked, his voice lowering slightly as he detected the note of pain in his protégé’s voice.

“It’s about what happened to her six months ago…”
Chapter Forty-Four

The weird thing about chronic insomnia is that when you finally do get to sleep, the kind of dreamless sleep where you just fall right off and don’t move so much as a muscle, even a couple of hours leaves you feeling refreshed and somewhat energized. She was still sore, still tired, but definitely better off than she was earlier. Hopefully this second wind would carry her through the rest of the evening.

Felicity quickly got dressed in a black wool Gucci pantsuit and low cut black silk blouse before grabbing a second outfit and an extra pair of shoes she could wear to dinner later in case Isabel still wanted to go out. She needed to get closer to the woman and perhaps in a more casual setting she might actually let down her guard somewhat.

It was a longshot, but what the hell, right? Besides, she really was looking forward to a little wining and dining for once...even if Isabel was the one she’d be doing it with.

Not doing *it*; doing *it*.

“Fuck it; whatever,” she said out loud. “Can’t even talk to myself without making a Freudian slip. Fan-freaking-tastic.”

She stopped and stared at her reflection with a grimace, “You know your love life sucks when the only people who ever offer you even a shot at romance are either bad guys or asshat masks looking for intel.” She snorted, “Well, at least maybe this time I’ll actually get to eat something before some jealous territorial pain in the mask comes barging into the restaurant with a wild hair up his butt and a willingness to ruin what few crumbs of self-esteem I have left.”

That was the one thing she regretted about her now notorious evening out with Daniel; she never got to eat her dinner. Well, her main regret anyway. There were a lot of things about her flirtation with Daniel Garret she regretted but she could handle being used, she could handle being humiliated, she could even deal with the fact that she’d never be able to show her face at Table Salt ever again (the wait staff was kind of snotty anyway and the service was lousy); no, what she couldn’t handle was the fact that she never even got to take home a doggie bag. She was so hungry and so depressed after that scene she wound up eating seventy-five dollars’ worth of take-out and two pints of Ben and Jerry’s over her sink. Plus, in addition to embarrassing her publicly and forcing her to buy her own dinner, when Oliver swung on Daniel in the middle of the crowded restaurant (in full view of a dozen camera-phones whose captured footage she had to spend days tracking down and destroying) he knocked over the bottle of red wine Asshat Mask Boy Number Two ordered and she wound up wearing it, thus ruining her new dress bought especially for that one disastrous excuse of a date.

Her new and very expensive dress.

Her new and very expensive white dress.

That she paid retail for.

Retail.

Depression, indigestion, and her favorite dry cleaner’s futile efforts to get red wine out of white silk did not make for a fun evening out on the town. It certainly didn’t qualify as being ‘wined and dined’ if you never got to the dinner part and you had to go home with more wine in your underwear than in your glass afterwards.

She shook her head slightly, eyeing her reflection with a world-weary expression on her face,
“Swear to God, if Isabel does wind up giving good date I might actually have to consider giving the whole lesbian thing a shot after all.”

She used a little concealer and some loose powder on the bruises and eschewed lipstick in favor of a slightly tinted medicated chap stick. It washed her out a little but she didn’t want to put anything heavy on her bottom lip while it was healing. To counter that she made her eyes up a little more heavily and darker than she usually would, put in her contacts, and used a clip to gather her hair in a messy up do which really pulled the look together. The faint discoloration of the bruises was still visible through the foundation but the herbs had already brought down the swelling considerably. By tonight it might actually be healed enough that she wouldn’t attract too many stares.

She looked at her reflection critically. “Not bad,” she muttered. “Not great, but not bad.”

The slim fitted trousers and cut of the lined wool jacket lengthened her silhouette making her seem taller while the deep V neckline of the black silk shell underneath helped maintain that illusion, drawing the eye in and then down. Although she usually detested hip huggers in general, instead of cutting her across the hips and making her bottom appear unnecessarily wide, the waistline of the tailored trousers was angled at a slight V, following the cut of the jacket and blouse, and rested just below her navel but higher up than most traditional hip huggers would. She threw on some chunky gold jewelry, a belt with a matching gold buckle to add some color, along with a pair of Gianvito Rossi black leather stiletto booties to complete the outfit because, unfortunately, the trousers were cut so long that flats were not an option.

The only thing about the outfit she really hated were the shoes. She hadn’t wanted to wear such high heels but there had been no other choice. Even in the stiletto booties the hem of the trousers nearly brushed the ground which, while adding to the illusion of extra height by lengthening her legs, also meant she’d have to spend the rest of the evening in four inch heels. It was either part of the design or proof that her sister forgot to take them in to get them altered; either way it would do and, other than the boots, it was a fairly comfortable outfit and made her look confident and professional in spite of the bruises.

She decided to pack a bag to leave in the office so she could have her own workout clothes as well as extra outfits just in case she needed them. Also, knowing she might need to shower there occasionally, she packed some toiletries and cosmetics as well as an extra toothbrush. Assuming her time with the OO did work out, she’d probably be spending a lot of late nights there, enough to get very familiar with its lovely couch and, quote, ‘dorm room setup’.

That was something she hadn’t really had time to think about yet: If Orbital did turn out to be 100% legit (she still had major ping but it was possible), would she stay onboard? Did she even want to? Honestly, yeah; yes, she wanted to run a team of her own. She had been taking a step back to masks for years now, running their operations with limited say, and now she wanted a mission of her own. It was time, damn it. While she loved Bruce and Oliver’s teams, and while she was proud of the work they had accomplished together, they were still *their* teams, *their* missions; not hers. Both men had made sure she understood that; from the words ‘you’re just a tech’ and ‘you’re not a vigilante’ to ‘you’re out’, they made it very clear that in the vigilante pecking order she came in dead last.

Yes, both men loved her and she loved them, but this wasn’t about that; this was about her and what she wanted to do for a change. She wanted to be her own hero. She wanted to live up to the speech she had given Bruce and she couldn’t do that and keep playing ‘just’ the blonde love interest; she had to be more than that. She *wanted* to be more than that. She started off just thinking she would investigate Orbital then get out but she wanted this now and, as it turned out, she was pretty freaking great at it. Standing up to Helena today, seeing the look of respect on the faces around her, knowing
that she could handle something as big and important as the title of Director; yes, she wanted it all.

The only problem she had now, assuming everything did pan out, was Bruce. If they did get married eventually he’d expect her to join his mission and, while she didn’t mind helping him, it would still be *his* mission, not hers. And if he did as he promised and retired, would he expect her to retire as well? Also, he said he wanted kids with her sooner rather than later; she wanted them, sure, but she wasn’t really ready for that yet. In a lot of ways she was just now coming into her own.

She agreed to marry him but that didn’t mean she wanted to marry him tomorrow or start popping out kids next week; it meant that she wanted to state her commitment to making their relationship work and take it to the next level eventually. Wasn’t that what an engagement was? A commitment leading up to a bigger commitment? A sort of trial by fire before entering into something that couldn’t be easily dismissed or dissolved? Bruce probably didn’t see it that way but she did and they still had a lot of things to work out between them before they got married. Did she want to be Mrs. Batman? Yes. She could see spending her life as Bruce’s wife, she could even imagine herself as a mother, but only if Bruce was willing to compromise as well. Tonight had been a good start but one small hard-won concession did not a marriage make.

Then there was what happened after they made that commitment; could she run something like the OO and still pick her kids up from daycare? Could she run a team of heroes and still find time to bake cookies and wipe snotty noses? Would Bruce be willing to take a backseat to her mission from time to time in the same way he expected her to do with the Bat’s and pick up the slack? Who knows, maybe; anything was possible but she needed time to settle in and figure it out first.

No sense worrying about it now, she thought. First off, until she got to the bottom of things she couldn’t really bank on anything much less that she’d wind up staying with Orbital. Secondly, Bruce was really pissed at her at the moment. Really, really pissed.

Despite the kiss he’d given her earlier she knew that he was still very angry and wouldn’t be overly receptive to discussing the practicalities of their relationship until he’d had time to calm down. Even then there would be a few fireworks because once Bruce latched on to something, he didn’t let it go without a fight.

Although to people looking from the outside in it probably seemed like things between them were going at warp speed, she knew Bruce was not an impulsive guy and that his decision to ask her to marry him had not been made recklessly or merely in the heat of passion. Bruce was a planner, a strategist; any decision he made was done with careful consideration including this one. Yes, he loved her, but emotion was just a part of it. All of the ‘marriage protocols’ he had told her about still came into play and the logical part of her brain could appreciate that even if the girly romantic side of her didn’t.

Bruce was not impulsive or unreasonable; he was, however, stubborn. Once he made up his mind he was ready to get it done and move on. What made him an excellent tactician also made him a not so excellent fiancé, but she did love him and she was willing to ramp up the timeline somewhat, just not as fast as he’d like. He wanted to get married in six weeks and, while she’d prefer they wait a year or so, she could compromise a little and see her way to agreeing to marry him in six months or so providing that everything else had been sorted first. While the Bat didn’t negotiate the businessman would and he is who she’d focus all her arguments on.

His decision to marry her wasn’t just a romantic gesture but a tactical move on his part and she knew that going in. Marrying her quickly was as well. Expedience was a key weapon in his arsenal as both the Bat and as the businessman. In his mind the longer the engagement, the more that could go
wrong. There would be a frenzy of press coverage once they became engaged so marrying her quickly would minimize a lot of that. At the same time, speculation would run rampant over why he had chosen to move so quickly. It was one of the arguments she planned to use against him once they had a chance to discuss everything. Six weeks and she’d be all over the papers as his shotgun bride; six months and they were a sweet love story who didn’t believe in stretching things out. He wouldn’t like it but she knew he’d have no choice but to see she was right.

Unfortunately, until this Orbital matter was settled, Bruce the businessman was in the shadows while the Bat remained front and center which meant she’d have to stay firm and deal with his mask persona until he was ready to unclench enough to pull his cowl out of his ass.

She glanced at the clock on the nightstand then reached for the remote and hit a button causing a large screen television to descend from the ceiling. She turned on C-Span so she could listen to the Inquiry into the LexCorp scandal as she packed. The Senate investigation into allegations of misconduct by former Senator Frank Miller had begun a few days ago in earnest but she hadn’t had time to so much as read a paper yet. Since she was partially responsible for making it happen, even if no one else knew, she was kind of curious to see how it was going.

As she gathered up her clothes she noticed a beautiful dark haired woman being sworn in to testify, the scrolling banner on the bottom of the screen indicating that this was Lois Lane, the woman who had written the article that had blown the scandal wide open.

A stony faced man she recognized as Walter Reilly, a Senator from right here in Gotham began to speak. Despite his grim façade on the panel, Senator Reilly prided himself on being fair minded and even billed himself jokingly as ‘the last liberal ever elected by the state of New York’. He was also one of the last honest politicians left which is probably why he’d been selected to be on the panel to begin with. Despite the fact that he was from an opposing political party, he’d give Miller a fair shake but he wouldn’t be cowed or pressured into letting him slide either.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Lane.”

“Good afternoon,” she returned in a tone that was both brisk and professional.

“You’ve already been sworn in so we’ll forgo that part and get straight to the report as filed by the investigative committee,” he said as he gathered up the papers in front of him, straightened his glasses, and began to read out loud, “Ms. Lane,” the Senator began, “According to your article you claim that after receiving numerous whistleblower allegations of misconduct by the former head of the Department Of Defense’s Subcommittee on Financial and Contracting Oversight, Senator Francis Miller, you initiated an investigation into these allegations. These include allegations that Senator Miller had a conflict of interest related to his awarding a defense contract to LuthorCorp, the acceptance of monetary remunerations in exchange for said contract, that he abused his office’s resources for personal gain, that the former senator from Illinois improperly concealed or destroyed records, improperly favored certain employees and retaliated against those who brought attention to his misconduct. The Subcommittee, after hearing from several members of his staff, did find that there was a widespread belief that Senator Miller engaged in those actions and that belief contributed to an office environment characterized by low morale, fear, and general dissatisfaction with Senator Miller’s leadership.” The tempo and pacing of his words was firm and brusque, a testament to his status as a native Gothamite as he ran through the preliminaries as quickly as possible.

“Mr. Alexander Luthor, head of LuthorCorp, who is scheduled to testify before this panel next week, has been quoted by your paper as well as other news outlets as saying that he had no previous knowledge of any such collusion between his employee, Mr. Mallory, and Senator Miller, nor was
he ever approached by the former Senator in relation to this matter either before or after the fact.

However, in your follow-up article you allude to a source close to Mr. Luthor who claimed to

witness a confrontation in which Mr. Luthor demanded he return the ‘advance’ his company had

paid him for some ‘upcoming speaking engagements and book deal’. You allege there never was

such a deal and that the monies Mr. Luthor referred to were actually the funds Mr. Mallory had

supposedly paid him to secure the defense contract. During this confrontation your source claims that

the Senator did approach him in a somewhat hostile and aggressive manner, specifically threatening
to use his political clout to bring harm to his company and to Mr. Luthor personally, using the words,
‘I will bury you’.”

“That’s a bit Don Corleone,” Felicity said with a snort. Someone apparently caught a Godfather rerun on cable. “He probably followed it up by leaving a toupee on Luthor’s pillow instead of a horse’s head.”

“Your recent follow-up article states that this incident supports allegations that the former Senator habitually engaged in intimidation tactics and ethics violations and that Mr. Luthor, while according to your source was supposedly not aware of the arrangement between his employee and Senator Miller before the fact, was allegedly aware of it afterwards and sought to cover up his company’s involvement thereby making him subject to prosecution for the crimes of extortion, perjury, corruption, bribery charges, etc.; crimes that fall under both the RICO statute and the Hobbs Act as an accessory after the fact.”

He shuffled his papers once again, “Senator Miller resigned from his office citing health concerns following the instigation of this investigation but it is our job to determine if criminal charges of High Crimes and Misdemeanors including charges of bribery, corruption, perjury, etc. should be levied against the former Senator as well as possible fines and legal action levied against LuthorCorp’s Weapon’s Division, Mr. Alexander Luthor, and Mr. Sebastien Mallory specifically, who you claim was in collusion with Mr. Miller undercut the competition over the defense contract through financial inducement.”

The senator looked up from the official report with a wry grimace. “Okay, now that all of that is done we can finally get down to business.” There was a small spurt of muffled laughter as the gallery apparently was in agreement with the now disgruntled and impatient Senator. “Just to go over this again, Ms. Lane; you testified earlier that you had been investigating Senator Miller’s suspected misuse of funds when you came across evidence that he had allegedly taken bribes; specifically that he had been approached by Sebastien Mallory, an executive from LuthorCorp’s Weapon’s Division, correct?”

Felicity turned up the volume and walked into the bathroom to grab the cosmetics case she had packed earlier.

“That is correct,” she confirmed without hesitation. “I was given copies of numerous emails, evidence of phone calls, and financial transactions between the Senator and Mr. Mallory as well as audio files and video footage that had supposedly been recorded by the Senator himself to be used as insurance against Mr. Mallory and LuthorCorp executives to ensure that he would not be harmed by their testimony should any of his crimes come to light. Furthermore I was given evidence that the former Senator regularly engaged in extortion and intimidation against his staff, opposing political parties, as well as affluent members of the business community by engaging paid escorts using public funds to set up what is commonly referred to as ‘honey traps’ in order to record footage of a sexual and potentially damaging nature. He kept recordings of all of these sessions and used them as leverage in order to shore up his political position or to extract financial considerations from these men that were then placed in an illegal offshore ‘retirement fund’.”
A low hum of chatter echoed around the room at that and Senator Reilly turned a hard eye on the gallery members, struck his gavel once for silence, then cleared his throat before taking a sip of water and shuffling through the report in front of him once more.

Felicity walked back into the room and glanced at the slightly smug look on the journalist’s face with a smile of her own. It was fairly obvious that Lane was enjoying the fact that she was the one putting the final nail in Miller’s coffin.

“You go, Lane! Nail that bastard to the wall,” she chuckled as she walked over to the dresser in order to gather some undergarments. She’d perused some of the reporter’s evidence against Miller and he was definitely a scumbag of the highest order. The reporter had done such a good job uncovering all that evidence that Felicity almost felt bad about cutting her off at the pass and covering Isabel’s ass. Still, it had been Oliver on the line as well so...

It was weird, Felicity thought. To think that this whole entire thing, Bruce, Orbital, Oliver; all of it was due to Lois Lane and her clumsy hack into QC’s servers just a few short weeks ago. Well, that and Helena but Helena could suck it.

When this was all over she was definitely sending Lois Lane a cookie bouquet; in part to thank her and also as revenge for getting all this crap stirred up in the first place.

She eyed the woman’s sharp looking suit and slim willowy figure with a smirk, “Serves you right if you gain a few pounds there, Lane. You managed to put me through hell, you know that? We’re talking chocolate dipped Double-Stuffed caloric-filled revenge on a stick,” she said to the screen then paused. “Damn, now I want a cookie,” she muttered. “I need to stop by the store and pick some up later. Ooh and milk. Double-Stuffed decadence and milky goodness coming up!” She looked at her rapidly filling case and garment bags, “Okay, got the extra suits, tennis shoes—what am I missing? Socks! Need some socks.” She looked in the drawer, “No socks. Damn… Well, crap; I’ll just borrow a few pairs from Bruce; he probably won’t mind, right?”

Felicity felt a pang of conscience; she really needed to buy some socks of her own instead of constantly stealing his. Maybe she’d stop by Killinger’s after she went to the dealership tomorrow because there was no way she’d have time for it today. Actually, she might not have time for it tomorrow either now that she thought about it.

She looked down at the socks in her hand thoughtfully.

His socks were pretty warm and cozy and he had a whole drawer of them; it’s not like he’d miss a few pairs...

She stuffed them in the bag then moved on.

“Ms. Lane, as you just testified and in your article, you cited evidence allegedly linking monies sent from an off-shore account belonging to an alias you claim was being used by Sebastien Mallory in order to funnel bribes into yet another off-shore account owned by Senator Miller. Furthermore, you claimed both in your articles and in your testimony here to have documents and interviews related to these allegations and others consisting of approximately two hundred and fifty pages of e-mails, memoranda, and records as well as hundreds of pages of documents provided independently by whistleblowers that you allege Mr. Miller attempted to destroy or suppress through document tampering and intimidation. That said, these documents, some of which were highly classified, were allegedly received from whistleblowers and were not provided to you in an official capacity nor did you have clearance to access those files and you have yet to turn them over to us so that we can examine this evidence for ourselves. Are you now willing to do so?”
The paper’s attorney spoke, “Ms. Lane is willing to turn over any and all supporting documentation, Senator, as well as the identity or identities of her source or sources so long as both Ms. Lane and they remain covered by the immunity agreement the paper’s attorneys negotiated for on their behalf.”

“Very well, then,” Reilly said with a nod. “Now that that’s settled, all that’s left is for Ms. Lane to answer the question ‘who was your source or sources and how did you come by this information in the first place?’”

“I received this information through…” She stopped, looking confused. “I met with…um, a man…I, um, his name was…no, no it wasn’t a man; it was a woman. Or was it? I…I don’t…”

Felicity glanced at the television with a frown.

“Ms. Lane,” Senator Reilly repeated, his brow furrowed in a mixture of annoyance and concern. “Who was your source? Where did you come by this evidence?”

“I…” Lane seemed to struggle, her words strangling in her throat. “I’m sorry, I’m just very thirsty. I just need a moment,” Lois said slurring her words slightly as she reached for her water and drank greedily.

Felicity stuffed the last of her clothing into the small duffle bag as she glanced up at the screen in concern. The woman who had seemed so confident and composed just moments ago was now acting very out of character for some reason. Something was wrong; she almost seemed drunk. It was like she was drugged…

“Shit,” Felicity said.

She’d seen this before.

A tall dark-haired man in thick rimmed glasses who was seated beside her turned to her in concern, “Lois? Are you alright?”

“I—I don’t know,” Lane said putting down her glass. “My head…I feel…strange. Hard to think…”

“Ms. Lane, please answer the question,” Reilly demanded impatiently. “Who was your source; how did you come by this information?”

“I don’t know,” Lois said, “I can’t remember,” she said shaking her head slowly.

“Ms. Lane, you agreed to cooperate with this investigation fully. Now, who is your source?” The senator asked curtly. “I will remind you that you are under oath and will be held in contempt if you do not answer the question!”

“I can’t remember,” she said turning to her companion, “Clark, why can’t I remember?” She asked in a panicked tone. “Why are we here?” She clutched his arm tightly as she looked around in confusion.

“We’re at the inquiry into Miller; what’s wrong?,” He said, the camera panning in on his tense expression.

Felicity sat heavily on the bed and watched wide-eyed as Lane seemed to fall apart on national television.

“Ms. Lane, you will be held in contempt if you do not answer the question!”
“I can’t remember,” she cried out. “Where am I? How did I get here? What’s happening to me?” She jumped out of her chair and looked around like a cornered animal. Her companion and the paper’s attorney both reacted in alarm, calling out her name and a few people in the gallery behind them began to get up from their seats as a low murmur arose from the gallery. She clutched her head suddenly and cried out, “Something’s wrong with my head! It hurts! It burns! Help me! Clark!” She screamed in agony. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed in a dead faint.

“Lois!” The dark haired man she had called ‘Clark’ rushed to catch her as the entire room burst into pandemonium. He turned to an older man who had risen to his feet behind them that Felicity recognized as being Perry White, the Planet’s Editor-In-Chief, “Something’s wrong; call 911!”

“Call an ambulance!” He ordered as a couple of Marines came over to investigate, Perry turned to a young African-American boy who had moved to stand behind them, “Keith! Son, go call Mom and tell her what’s happening then wait for me outside.”

“Okay Dad,” the boy said, making his way out of the room.

Lois began to go into a violent seizure causing the entire room, including the panel of senators at the head of the proceedings to leap to their feet as nervous chatter erupted all around them. Perry turned to the Marines again, “Call an ambulance! Now damn it!”

She watched as some paramedics rushed to the fallen woman’s side as Senator Reilly called for order and instructed the Marine’s to clear the room. As the camera panned towards Lois Lane’s pale and still form being loaded onto a gurney she happened to catch the expressions on Mallory and Miller’s faces. She grabbed the remote to the digital receiver and rewound the live feed before pausing it. Bruce’s television was top of the line, it was technology that wasn’t even on the market yet so she got a crystal clear HD quality image of the two men’s faces.

There was no surprise on either man’s expression but while Miller was calm and composed, Mallory’s smirk was one of malicious triumph.

Bruce stood near the car as the Wayne Gulfstream came to a stop and waited for Queen and Luke to disembark. Part of him wanted to go for Queen’s throat the second he left the plane but, much as he hated to admit it, he needed him. Something was happening; something bigger than just his team. This involved both of them and they’d have to work together in order to get to the bottom of this Orbital business once and for all.

He closed his eyes briefly and forced himself to relax. When Tim told him what had happened to Felicity he didn’t know whether to put his fist through the wall or run back to the penthouse and just hold her until he could breathe again.

She almost died. She should have died.

Pink mist. Those were the words this Detective Lance used and that Tim had parroted back to him. There shouldn’t have even been a body left to bury and yet she lived.

He closed his eyes and swallowed convulsively. He suspected her miraculous survival was due in part to the Omega Device having once been a victim of the odd phenomena that surrounded it himself.
That was one mystery solved at least; apparently he had been in the custody of ARGUS but that didn’t explain the strange snippets of memories he had connected to that device or how she managed to get everyone out before it blew. Obviously they had been affected by some sort of time dilation; but why she hadn’t been remained a mystery that only she could shed light on. That was something he’d have to discuss with her along with her previous confrontations with Deathstroke.

Tim told him that according to Lance, Felicity had no choice but to kill a man, possibly several, in addition to taking out Slade and all of it was because of him; Queen and his damn mission. It had been bad enough when he discovered that she had taken out Deathstroke but now that he had more of the details…

There was still so much he didn’t know but that little bit of information explained so much: Her restless sleeping habits, the revelation Tim shared that she had taken to carrying a gun, her disregard for her own personal safety that bordered on a death wish, the fact that she refused to talk about that night, and the way she would shake like a leaf anytime he tried to ask; all of them being breadcrumbs she’d left for him along the way, he just couldn’t see it before now.

Just the thought of how close he’d come to losing her made him want to vomit. He rubbed the bridge of his nose wearily, when this was done he and Felicity were going to have a very long talk. First though, he needed to speak with Queen and try to get through it without killing him.

He watched as the two men stepped out of the jet and onto the tarmac, his jaw clenching with barely suppressed rage as he saw Queen for the first time. He headed towards them, his eyes locked on the other man, every muscle tensed for a fight despite the fact that he’d just spent the last several minutes trying to convince himself not to tear that son of a bitch apart with his bare hands.

“Sir,” Alfred called out from the car. Bruce flicked his eyes towards him. “It’s Mr. Fox on the phone, sir; he says it’s urgent business regarding Wayne Publications.”

“Take a message,” he growled as he stalked towards his prey.

Luke stared down at his phone in consternation, “Damn.”

“What?” Oliver asked, grabbing his carry-on and following him out.

“I tried calling my dad but according to his assistant he’s in meetings for the rest of the day and he left instructions not to be disturbed.” He shook his head and puffed out a breath of exasperation, “She said she’d leave him a message but he probably won’t be able to get back with me until later tonight because he has to fly out to Metropolis because of some kind of emergency.” He threw Oliver an apologetic look, “Listen, we’ll take a cab to my dad’s place and Peggy Ann can put you up in the guest room for now, okay?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Oliver told him. “I’m perfectly capable of getting a hotel room.”

“Yeah, this close to the Gala?” Luke snorted, “Good luck. Even the crack hotels that charge by the hour are filled with tourists and paparazzi. Seriously, the Foundation Gala attracts more celebrities than the Oscars.”

“Really?” He said, looking at him in mild disbelief. “For a children’s charity?”

Luke turned to him with a smirk, “Yeah, well, it never used to be this big of a deal until Tam took a seat on the board.”
He furrowed his brow in confusion, “Your sister?”

He nodded, “Because of her job she practically knows everybody who’s anybody in Hollywood and in Gotham Society. How she does it I have no idea but they raise millions of dollars every year for missions both here and abroad, so…”

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Huh, my mom used to attend it for years but I never really paid a lot of attention to that sort of thing. I should get your sister to talk to Thea about doing something similar for our family’s Glades Charity,” he said as the doors opened and they disembarked. “Right now though I’m more concerned with getting to Felicity and getting her as far away from Isabel and Stellmoor as possible.”

“I’ll agree to getting her away from all this Orbital stuff but it’s up to her if she wants to return with you to Starling,” Luke told him, a hint of darkness coloring his tone.

Oliver felt a surge of annoyance at his words but bit back a hasty response and said, “Just let me talk to her first and we’ll figure something out. If she doesn’t want to come back with me, fine; but I’m not leaving her here with Wayne.”

“Agreed,” Luke said. “If I have to I’ll take her back with me to Africa or maybe Dick can take her to join his team in New Mexico.”

Oliver tightened his grip on his carry-on and bit his tongue even though he wanted nothing more than to tell the other man that the only way he’d be taking her to Africa was over his dead body, brother or no brother. As for this ‘Dick’ person, there was no way in hell that was happening either. Felicity was his; his girl, his responsibility and if she was going with anyone, it was with him.

As soon as he set foot on the tarmac he saw Wayne heading straight for them, his fists clenched at his sides and a thunderous look of rage on his face. Oliver dropped his bag and met him half-way, both men getting well into the other one’s personal space until they were practically nose to nose.

“Felicity isn’t going anywhere with you,” Bruce told him in a voice that didn’t need to be distorted by electronics to send shivers down most men’s spines.

Bruce seemed to grow as a shadow fell over them. Even dressed more casually than Oliver had ever seen him, the Bat seemed to surround Wayne, his grim presence just as intimidating as it would have been in the cowl and cape. Oliver, however, had been living in the same shadows the Bat dwelt in for years and, unlike Wayne, the Arrow had spilled blood.

Batman might have the home field advantage, he might even be the better and more experienced fighter, but the Arrow didn’t back down from a threat even if that meant taking a life. He was already
on the edge and, Batman or no Batman; that anger made him far more dangerous than Wayne.

Oliver shifted infinitesimally closer, barely a hairsbreadth, but given their already intimate proximity to one another it was enough, “If I find out that you knowingly put her in harm’s way, I will put an arrow right through your fucking chest.” He said the words softly in an almost conversational tone. He didn’t have to yell or scream; it was enough.

Wayne’s tone grew even colder as he narrowed his eyes. “You’re lucky, Queen; very lucky that, unlike you, I’m not a murderer,” he said with equal menace, not backing down an inch, “because right now all I want to do is tear out your goddamn throat. Especially since I just found out that Felicity almost killed herself six months ago; she would have blown herself up along with Deathstroke because you put her in the path of that fucking maniac twice!”

Oliver’s mouth thinned into a grim line as Luke stepped forward, his expression one of confusion and anger.

“What? What the hell are you talking about?” He demanded.

Wayne stepped back, hitching his chin in Oliver’s direction, “Ask your friend, Queen. In order to take out Deathstroke she booby-trapped herself with a bomb.”


Oliver shifted his stance, “It’s true.” He clenched his jaw, his eyes locked on Wayne, “Where is she?”

“‘It’s true’?” Luke spat out. “What the fuck do you mean, ‘it’s true’? My sister tried to kill herself and I’m just now hearing about it?”

“Now’s not the time,” He bit out. “Now, where the hell is Felicity?”

“Bullshit ‘now’s not the time’!” Luke said looking from one man to the other, “Somebody better tell me what the hell is going on!”

“Enough!” Bruce snapped, his dark gaze landing back on Oliver. “Felicity is inside Orbital gathering information.”

“You let Felicity go back in there?” Oliver demanded, feeling the urge to go at the other man with his fists. He stepped forward, his hands jerking upwards slightly to do just that before he managed to reign in the impulse.

“I didn’t ‘let’ her do anything; she chose to go in,” Wayne said with deceptive calm.

“So Felicity’s in that place all alone while you two are out here comparing the size of your dicks?” Luke said derisively. “Fuck you; I’m going to find my sister and then both of you need to stay the hell away from her!”

“That’s not going to happen,” Bruce told the younger man.

Luke glared at him, “You let my sister go in to a potentially dangerous situation with no back up!”

“She has back up,” Bruce told him. “Wildcat Grant and an operative I’ve worked with in the past going by the handle ‘Katana’ are offering her support from inside the facility. Also Dick has the place staked out and Canary should be there shortly if she isn’t already.”
“Fine, take me there,” Oliver told him.

“First we have to talk,” the other man said tersely. “I’ve been given some information and I believe it involves both your team and mine so, as much as I would love to beat you until you no longer resemble something human, I have no choice but to try to make this work in order to keep her safe.”

“So talk,” Oliver told him.

“Not here,” Bruce said. “We’ll head to the Batcave first and then I’ll take you to the Orbital facility so we can wait for Felicity. All of us,” he said, sparing a look towards her brother.


A large part of him wanted to protest but something in his tone told him that this was something he’d want to hear. He nodded his head jerkily, “Let’s go.”

Felicity had seen symptoms similar to Lois’s before when Team Arrow investigated HIVE as well as the mind control cocktail created by Avery Twombey even though his formula didn’t cause as violent a reaction. The confusion and memory loss however were just like the cases they’d run into last year but Twombey was in ARGUS custody and, according to Colonel Trevor, HIVE had gone dark months ago. HIVE didn’t fit perfectly either because they tended to keep a low profile and this was very, very public. Twombey wasn’t as discreet as HIVE but he was only interested in corporate espionage, not politics; and if it was HIVE, why would they care about Lois Lane and some disgraced senator?

She dropped what she was doing and immediately headed to the office then went down to the Alternate Watchtower console. Quickly hacking into the Daily Planet’s server she looked for the information that Lane had uncovered a few weeks ago; the same files Felicity had looked through when the reporter had attempted to dig up evidence against Isabel.

Nothing.

It was gone. Not just gone but really gone; the fact that there was nothing there just screamed ‘hack’. It was as though it had never existed even though Felicity knew it had. She glanced at her phone and cursed; she had to go and tracing the hack could take hours. Making a quick decision she connected to LAIR and to Barbara.

“What the hell were you thinking going in blind like that?” The woman said right off the bat. “Do you know how much shit hit the fan this morning? Bruce was so out of control he was playing Batman on the streets of Gotham in his goddamn civvies! I’m been scrubbing traffic cam footage all goddamn morning not to mention the fact that I’ve had to deal with the bug firmly wedged up that man’s ass because of you!”

“Barbara, no time for that now,” Felicity said quickly. “Listen, have you been listening to the news?”

“No, why?” She said, still scowling but alert.

“Felicity, are you okay?” Tim asked coming on screen with Roy and Dig behind him. “What happened to your face?” He asked in alarm.

“Sparring accident,” she told him quickly.

“Sparring accident? What--!”
“Hey Felicity,” Thea said, crowding him out. “Can I be a bridesmaid? Sara said you’d be okay with it but I just wanted to make sure.”

She waved her off, “Yeah, sure, fine! I’m kind of in a rush though. Barbara, I need you to trace a hack for me.”

“What’s the hack?” Barbara asked, getting down to business.

Felicity quickly sent her the information, “I’m sending it now. Someone hacked Lois Lane’s terminal at the Daily Planet and destroyed some evidence she had on their servers regarding the Senator Miller thing.”

Lance came up beside Diggle, “Isn’t that the crooked Senator who was taking bribes? The one who’s been all over the news claiming it was some kind of left wing conspiracy or some crap?”

“Yeah, Edge News has been claiming that Lane’s just setting him up so she can get another Pulitzer or something,” Roy offered. “They’ve been shouting about how she’s lying and that all the evidence had to be faked.”

Everyone looked at him.

“You watch Edge News?” Diggle asked dubiously.

“No, but I do watch The Daily Show every once in a while,” he told him then shrugged, “It comes on right after South Park.”

“Are you sure the evidence was there to begin with?” Barbara asked her once she had accessed the server.

“Positive,” she said. “I saw it myself. I even planted some of it for her to find.”

“How did you get involved with Lois Lane and this Senator Miller stuff to begin with?” Tim asked. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you later but for now I have to go,” she told him. “Barb, while you’re running the back-trace on that hack, also find out who else she passed that information to and try to get as much information on Mallory and Miller as you can. See if they or any of their associates have connections to ARGUS as well as any alleged connections to HIVE. If I’m right, and I probably am, whoever did the hatchet job on Lane probably cast a wide net to cover their tracks but we might get lucky.”

Barbara and Diggle both looked at her in alarm.

“HIVE? What’s going on?” Diggle asked quickly.

“You might want to turn on the TV,” she told him. “Lois Lane appeared disoriented and then collapsed before she could name names at the Senatorial Inquest into the Bribery Scandal. She was confused, showed extreme thirst, followed by memory loss, lost consciousness, and then immediately went into a grand mal seizure.”

“Sounds like what happened to Deadshot,” he said grimly. “Exactly the same.”

“You should call the Colonel,” she told him, “find out if ARGUS has anything.”

“You think Twombey’s in on this or HIVE?” He asked grimly.

“I don’t know,” she told him. “It wouldn’t be the first time ARGUS dropped the ball but since
Trevor’s been in charge things have been going pretty smoothly. Still, there’s always the possibility Mallory or someone working in the Senator’s camp could have dosed her with his serum but if I had to pick one I’d say this feels more like HIVE to me. Even though HIVE isn’t usually this overt, the effects of Twombey’s serum weren’t quite as acute as what I saw but it could be a different formula or she could have been given an overdose.”

He nodded, “On it,” Dig said, already taking out his cell and moving away from the monitor to make the call.

“Barb, hack Lane’s medical files and get the results of her blood tests to me ASAP just in case,” she told her. “There’s a file on Twombey’s serum for you to compare it against. If it’s HIVE though, the only things that will show up on the blood draws are elevated levels of Prolactin and Creatine Kinase which she’ll have no matter what because of the seizure.” She paused, “Since she passed out they’re going to do a MRI. Hack in and make sure they do an EEG as well just in case they don’t order one then compare her results with what we got from Deadshot and Lyla. If it’s HIVE the electrical activity in her brain is going to be off the charts and the memory centers of her brain are going to be lit up like a Christmas tree.”

“There’s more to this, isn’t there? What are you thinking?” Barbara asked her.

“I don’t know,” Felicity said. “Call it a hunch but something…something’s just hinky about this whole thing and I think it could be linked to Isabel.”

“Isabel Rochev was involved with the LuthorCorp bribery scandal?” Tim asked quickly.

“Like I said, it’s a long story,” Felicity told him. “I’ll check in later after I get back and tell you all about it.”

“All about what?” Tim asked sharply. “You aren’t going back into that Orbital place, are you? Bruce was ready to spit nails when he found out about that!”

“Bruce already knows I’m going back in,” she told him. “We talked about it this morning and he’s working it with me.”

“You expect me to believe for one second that Bruce is okay with you going back in alone without back up? Bullshit!” Tim asked darkly.

“I have back up,” she told him. “Dick’s got the place staked out and Wildcat Grant is already on the inside.”

“Wildcat’s involved with Orbital?” He asked in surprise then frowned, “Wait, Wildcat and Canary are both connected to Orbital? That’s kind of a weird coincidence.”

“Trust me it gets worse,” she said ruefully. “Look, I have to go,” she told them. “You got this Barb?”

“I’m on it,” she told her. “Just take care and watch your ass, Chickie.”

“You got it. Thanks,” she said right before logging off.

One thing’s for sure, she though as she headed back upstairs to gather the bag she’d packed, she and Isabel were going to have a very interesting conversation later.

An elderly man held the door open for them as they approached the antique Rolls Royce, “Master
Bruce.

“What?” Bruce growled as his angry companions got into the back of the Rolls Royce before him.

Alfred handed him the phone, “It’s Ms. Wells; apparently something’s happening at Wayne Publications that requires your immediate attention.”

“Great,” he muttered, slipping into the back. “Take us to the manor, Alfred.”

“Certainly sir,” the older man said with a nod.

Bruce settled into the seat across from Queen and spoke into the phone, “What’s happening?”

“Lois Lane had some kind of seizure in the middle of the Senate Inquiry on Miller,” she told him.

“Is she alright?” He frowned.

“She went into a light coma and they’re running tests but the doctors think she’ll pull through okay.”

“Then send some flowers,” Bruce said with a hint of aggravation. “Why are you calling me about this? Not to sound callous but I’m a bit busy at the moment.”

Wells made a disapproving noise, “The Planet’s servers and Lane’s personal computer have been hacked. All the information she was supposed to turn over has been destroyed and now Miller is threatening to sue,” she told him. “He held an impromptu press conference announcing that he intends to file a law suit against Lane, The Daily Planet, LexCorp, and Wayne Publications.”

“So what?” Bruce said irritably, “I could give a rat’s ass about Lex Luthor’s bottom line and we get sued all the time; Lucius can handle it.”

Queen looked at him curiously and he stifled the urge to deck him.

“It’s a big lawsuit, Bruce, and legal is going nuts. Plus, the way Lane went down is weird. The clip of her going into a seizure in the middle of the inquest is all over the news and they’re speculating it’s drugs or that she’s mentally ill and that we allowed a journalist working for the crown jewel of Wayne Publications to go ahead with a libelous story in order to take down Miller and get the Defense contract away from LexCorp.”

“That’s ridiculous,” he sneered. “It’s a big contract but it wouldn’t exactly make or break us if we didn’t get it; what would even be our motivation for something like that?”

“I know it’s stupid but Edge News is running with it.”

He snorted, “There’s a reason it’s called Edge ‘Entertainment’ News. Morgan Edge is a right-wing extremist crank and everyone knows it; no one takes the crap he yammers on about seriously. His network has been tossing out accusations about this being a liberal conspiracy since the second the story broke.”

“CNN, MSNBC, Headline News, even our own network has no choice but to run with the story as well, Bruce,” he could practically hear her shaking her head. “The shit has officially hit the fan.”

He rubbed his hand over his furrowed brow wearily, “I really don’t need this right now. What does Lucius want me to do about it?”

“He’s flying out to Metropolis and wants you with him on the jet.”
“No, absolutely not,” Bruce said firmly. “I can’t leave Gotham right now.”

“Bruce…”

“You go,” he told her. “I have…some other pressing issues that need all of my attention focused here for the time being.”

“Someone has to watch the company store,” she told him in a no nonsense tone. “You need to get ahead of this and show a united front with Lane and the paper. You’re the face of Wayne Enterprises; seeing you there supporting her will reassure the public that we stand firmly behind her story.”

He clenched his jaw, “How long would I have to be gone?”

“A few days,” she told him. “You just need to be there long enough to be seen visiting Lane in the hospital, stay for the press conference, then meet with the Planet’s legal team. You’ll be back before the weekend.”

“Goddamn it,” he swore impatiently. “I can’t be gone that long. I can give this a few hours but I have to be back by tonight.”

Her voice dropped to a more discreet level even though Bruce knew she was probably alone in her office, “I get that your ‘Special Projects’ division takes precedence over most things, Bruce; but you have a company to run as well. It’s just a few days, Bruce; let someone else on the team to handle it.”

“I can’t; not this time,” he said firmly.

“Lucius is going to want to you stay down there for a couple of days at least,” she told him. “I could give a rat’s ass what anyone else wants; one day is all I’m willing to spend on this,” he told her with a hint of irritation.

“Damn it Bruce; let someone else do it! Call Dick or somebody else for once,” she told him. “This is your company’s reputation at stake here!”

“What part of ‘I could give a rat’s ass,’ don’t you understand?” He told her firmly. Once again he cursed the fact that not only did Wells know his secret but that she wasn’t the least bit intimidated by the Bat or Bruce Wayne. It made her a hell of a business asset but a pain in the ass in situations like this one, “Lucius is the CEO, you’re his second in command, we all have jobs to do and this is yours; now make it happen! I can give it one night but that’s it! I’m coming back to Gotham tomorrow afternoon whether you have your end handled or not, am I understood?”

“Fine,” Wells said tersely. “I’ll see if we can reschedule the press conference but Lucius won’t be happy.”

“When is Lucius leaving?” He asked, ignoring her tone as well as her warning about Lucius. Right now Felicity was his main priority, not keeping himself in her father’s good graces.

“In about an hour or so. I can call him and see if he can give you some extra time but you need to be wheels up in order to make the evening news.”

“Tell him I’ll be there in an hour and a half. I have to run home and pack then settle a few things here before I go.”

“Texting him now,” she bit out, still obviously perturbed by his lack of cooperation. “And check
your inbox. I sent you a clip of Lane’s collapse along with all the pertinent information regarding the situation.”

“Call me if anything else happens,” he said before ending the call. He reached over to the smart television mounted on the console in the back of the limo and queued up the footage.

“What’s going on?” Queen asked. Bruce could practically see the wheels turning in the other man’s eyes as he gazed upon him with a calculating expression.

Bruce shot him a filthy look. Yeah, there was no way he was leaving Gotham any longer than was absolutely necessary. In fact, if he could catch her before she left the apartment he was taking Felicity with him; Orbital or no Orbital. “Something happened at the Miller thing. One of the reporters working for the Daily Planet collapsed and now all hell’s breaking loose.”

“Lois Lane?” Luke asked. “She did that big piece on the human trafficking situation in the Congo that helped get the UN more involved. She interviewed me when she came down to the DRC last year; she even snuck into one of the Marabunta camps and got some footage of one of their raids.” His brow furrowed in concerned, “She’s a hell of a tough lady; is she okay?”

“They said she had a seizure and went into a light coma but that they think she’ll recover,” he told him as he fast forwarded to the point of her collapse.

//Very well, then. Now that that’s settled, all that’s left is for Ms. Lane to answer the question ‘who was your source or sources and how did you come by this information in the first place?’//

//I received this information through…I met with…um, a man…I, um, his name was…no, no it wasn’t a man; it was a woman. Or was it? I…I don’t…?//

Bruce flicked his eyes toward his companion as Queen’s attention fixed sharply on the screen and his expression stilled.

//Ms. Lane. Who was your source? Where did you come by this evidence?//

//I…I’m sorry, I’m just very thirsty. I just need a moment.//

Bruce glanced over at the other man who pulled his cell out of his pocket and immediately dialed. “Who are you calling?”

“My team,” he said, not sparing him a look as he continued to keep his eye on the monitor. “Dig, have you seen the footage of Miller thing, yet?” He asked his partner, his tone sharp and biting. “She did? When?”

“What is it?” Bruce asked, suddenly getting the feeling he was out of the loop on something.//Lois? Are you alright?//

//I—I don’t know. My head…I feel…strange. Hard to think…//


“No,” Bruce said. He pulled out his own cell and dialed Felicity, holding the phone to his ear.

“Hello, you have reached the voice mailbox of Felicity Smoak. Please lea—”

“Damn it,” he cursed hanging up and tried texting her instead.
Felicity hurried through the lobby so she could catch a cab to Orbital. She was running later than she’d like but the whole thing with Lois Lane had caught her off-guard. If she was lucky she might get there just before—

“Felicity?”

“Jake,” Felicity stopped short just as she nearly ran into him. “What are you doing here?”

“I was actually picking up some pamphlets from your mom before I had to head back to Wayne Enterprises,” he said, flashing the handful of papers.

“My mom?” She asked.

“Stepmom? I don’t know; your family has some pretty interesting dynamics going on,” he grinned. “Dr. Fox.”

“Mama T’s back?” Felicity asked before turning back to look at the elevator. Damn, it was tempting to go up to see her but she was already so late. She looked at the pamphlets Jake was holding.

“Multiple Sclerosis? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s…it’s not me,” he said, suddenly looking tense and a bit downcast. “My mama was diagnosed a while back and I’ve been trying to get her on a few clinical trials. Your daddy suggested I talk to Dr. Fox since she might be able to help.”

“I’m so sorry,” Felicity said, “Is it bad? I mean, is she okay?”

“Not really, no,” he took a deep breath, his expression pained. “It’s type four; the doctor’s call it Progressive Relapsing MS. It’s pretty rare so there’s not a lot they can do. That’s why we were hoping to get her in a clinical trial but there aren’t a whole lot of them here in the States. Your mom—stepmom?” He looked at her curiously for confirmation.

“Stepmom is close enough but I just always called her Mama T so you could say she’s kind of my mom,” Felicity told him. “Well, sort of. Actually, not really since she was my dad’s first wife so technically we’re not related at all. Then again, I’m adopted so…”

“Like I said, you got yourself a real interesting family,” he grinned at her even though his expression still seemed pained.

“Yeah, we really do,” she said hitching her head to the side with a rueful look. “Anyway, was she able to help?”

“Eh,” he ran his hand over his hair wearily. “Not really; she tried. The only trial she could find dealing with that type of MS that was accepting patients as advanced as Mama is in Switzerland. Dr. Fox said she’d make a few calls but the problem is that even if we could get in, we couldn’t afford it. Wayne doesn’t have any security positions open in their offices over there and, even if they did, I’d have to be traveling all the time, work long hours, and my mama can’t take care of herself. At least back home she has family and friends to help her but if I move her to Switzerland she’d be on her own and I can’t afford to hire her a full-time nurse.”

“What about dad?” She asked. “Wayne has a Families in Need Fund for employees; maybe that would help?”

“I already applied for the grant but it’s not nearly enough to cover what we’d need.”
“Maybe dad could lend you the money?” She suggested.

“No,” he said firmly. “Even if I set my pride aside my Mama wouldn’t. It’s one thing to take a grant since that’s part of my benefits package with Wayne Security but outright charity? No, she wouldn’t take it. Besides, I can’t ask your daddy for something like that. If I went to him with my hand out then what’s to stop all his other employees from asking the same.”

“So there’s nothing you can do?” She asked with a frown.

He grimaced, “Dr. Fox said there might be something; she said the Mayo Clinic might have a trial coming up next year. Minnesota would be an easier commute than Switzerland but only if Mama can hang on long enough. If she can then Dr. Fox said she might be able to get her in.”

Felicity felt her heart clench in sympathy, “It’s that bad? I thought MS came and went with occasional remissions.”

“Her kind is pretty aggressive so we just don’t know,” he told her.

Felicity glanced over at the clock on the wall and cringed, “Um, Jake? I hate to leave but I’m late as it is. If you want to talk later though, you have my number.”

His brow furrowed, “Yeah,” he looked away from her contritely. “Uh, I was going to call you anyway. It’s about the dinner plans we had on Friday…”

Guilt flooded through her and she blushed, “Oh. I meant to call you about that myself.”

“I’m going to have to cancel; I’m sorry,” he told her.

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise, “Really?”

“I know what you said about being cursed when it comes to folks breaking things off after the first date but I want you to know that this has nothing to do with you,” he said quickly.

“No, of course,” she said. “Is it your mom? Do you need to go back home?”

“Actually it’s work,” he told her. “Your daddy needs me to go with him to Metropolis for the next few days and I have to help with setting up the security for the Gala so…”

“Oh.”

“I’m so sorry,” he told her. “I hope you aren’t mad at me.”

“No, not at all,” she assured him. “In fact, I was going to have to cancel myself. I just got a new job and the hours are kind of crazy,” she told him. “Maybe when things settle down we could have lunch or something? Just as friends, of course,” she said quickly. Yes, she was with Bruce but that didn’t mean she had to stop being friends with Jake.

Tim’s voice echoed in her conscience:

“…I just meant that it seems like you might be giving this guy the wrong impression.”

Damn Tim and his inconvenient habit of being right, she thought. Jake had enough on his plate without her accidently leading him on and if anyone knew what that felt like it to be on that end of things it was her. She wasn’t going to do that to another person.

“I just…I like being your friend even though I don’t think I’ve been a very good one lately,” she
began. “You’re pretty much the only new friend I’ve made since coming back home and I know I haven’t called you since we had lunch but if I had known about your mom…”

“No, don’t worry about that,” he said waving her off. “I’ve been pretty busy myself; I know how it is. Besides, you couldn’t have known about my mama since I never told you.”

“I know but--”

“No buts,” he told her firmly. “You don’t have anything to feel guilty about, I promise.”

Oh, but I do, Felicity thought feeling like something that should be scraped from the bottom of a shoe. “Actually, the truth is that…” She took a breath, “The truth is that I’ve been seeing someone else, someone I’ve known for a while actually, and I wanted to tell you about it. I mean, when we went out I wasn’t even--”

“It’s okay,” he said with a sad little smile.

“It’s not,” she told him. “I don’t want you to think I--.”

“Felicity, it was one date,” he told her with a kind look, “and you made it very clear that you just wanted to be friends from the get-go; I understand.”

“Are you sure?” She asked, still feeling awful.

“I’m positive,” he nodded. “Not that I wouldn’t have liked to be more but I guess it just wasn’t meant to be.”

She bit her lip, “Jake, really, I want you to know that I’m still your friend. In fact, maybe next week we could have lunch again and just talk.”

“I’d love to, I really would; and I’m not just blowing you off, I swear, but I can’t.” Again he gave her an apologetic look, “That’s the other thing I had to tell you; I have to take off for Central City to start my new job on Monday.”

“That soon?” She asked.

“Fraid so,” he told her. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” she told him with a soft smile. “It’s fine; and besides, at least we got to become friends, right?”

“We sure did,” he said, echoing her smile with one of his own.

“And you can still call me anytime you need to talk,” she told him. “I know people probably say that all the time but I really mean it.”

“I know you do,” he gave her a wide grin and wink at her, “I have truly enjoyed becoming your friend, Miss Baby.”

He held out his hand for her to clasp in a warm handshake but the second her skin touched his a bright spark of static electricity popped between them causing her to yelp with pain, “Yipes!” She said with a hiss as she shook her hand. She looked sown to see that it had actually been strong enough to leave a small white burn on her hand. “I’ve been shocked before but never *that* bad. Wow.”

He chuckled and flushed, “Yeah, it’s me. Ever since I was a kid, I don’t know why, but I’ve always
just attracted static electricity like you wouldn’t believe. It got so bad during thunderstorms that Mama threatened to rub me down with dryer sheets if I came anywhere near her.”

“Really?” She chuckled, the mood suddenly elevating.

“I put such a bad burn on my cousin one day the whole family took to calling me ‘Deathbolt’ for a whole summer. It got so bad even the cat used to run if I tried to pet it.” He sighed and gave her another wan smile, “Maybe we’ll get to see each other before I go after all. Think you can save me a dance at the Gala?”

“I think that can be arranged,” she nodded. “Goodbye Jake.”

“Goodbye Miss Baby Blue Eyes,” he told her.

She gave him one last smile before hurrying out the door and waving down a cab. As sad as she was to see Jake go perhaps it was for the best. She hadn’t been looking forward to breaking things off with him which was why she’d subconsciously kept putting it off. At least this way no one was hurt and besides, he had enough to worry about with his mother being sick; he certainly didn’t need to add her craziness on top of all that.

She hopped in the cab and gave the driver the address before settling back into her seat. She needed to get her head in the game anyway and, as bad as it sounded, Jake being out of the picture was just one less thing to worry about. She had enough on her plate as it was.

Whatever was happening; Orbital, the Miller Inquest, all of it was somehow connected and the person at the center of the storm was Isabel.

She had a sinking feeling that her very long day was going to turn into a very long night.

//*?/*?/*?/*

//Ms. Lane, please answer the question. Who was your source; how did you come by this information?//

//I don’t know. I can’t remember.//

“What’s wrong with her?” Luke asked, staring at the screen. “It’s like she’s drunk or on drugs or something.”

“I should have known she’d already be ahead of this,” Queen said with a sigh as he continued to speak into his cell, “And has Barbara found anything yet?”

//Ms. Lane, you agreed to cooperate with this investigation fully. Now, who is your source? I will remind you that you are under oath and will be held in contempt if you do not answer the question!//

//I can’t remember. Clark, why can’t I remember? Why are we here?//

//We’re at the inquiry into Miller; what’s wrong?//

“That doesn’t even sound like Lois,” Luke said, “The lady I met stared down a guy holding an AK-47 in her face like it was a pea shooter.”

Bruce glanced down at his phone again and clenched his jaw. She wasn’t texting him back. “Alfred, change of plans; take us to the Alternate Batcave.”

He dialed Dick.
“Of course, sir,” the elderly man said from the front of the car before getting on the off-ramp.

//Ms. Lane, you will be held in contempt if you do not answer the question!//

//I can’t remember. Where am I? How did I get here? What’s happening to me? Something’s wrong with my head! It hurts! It burns! Help me! Clark!//

//Lois! Something’s wrong; call 911!//

“Son of a bitch!” Queen cursed as he watched her collapse on-screen and go into a violent seizure as people swarmed her. “Have you gotten in touch with Trevor yet? What did he say?”

“Trevor? As in ARGUS?” Bruce asked sharply.

“What’s going on?” Dick asked from the other end of the line.

“Hold on for a second,” Bruce told him. “I’m putting you on speaker.” He hit the Bluetooth button on the panel and Dick’s voice came through the speakers.

//What’s going on?// Dick asked again.

“I don’t know yet,” Bruce told him.

Queen continued to ignore him, a fact which did nothing to help his temper. “Call me as soon as you find out anything and tell Trevor to keep us in the loop; thanks.”

“What do you know?” Bruce asked the other man, his voice taking on a dangerous edge.

“Last year we investigated a group calling themselves HIVE—”

“HIVE?” Bruce cut in. Damn it. “What about them?”

//The group that infiltrated ARGUS last year?// Dick said in surprise. //What am I missing?//

“There’s been an incident involving one of the reporters for the Daily Planet,” Bruce told him.

//Wait; you wouldn’t be talking about Lois Lane, would you?// Dick asked. //The one scheduled to testify before the senate?//

“That’s the one,” Bruce confirmed. “She collapsed before giving her testimony and showed evidence of memory loss and disorientation.”

//Is she okay?//

“According to Wells she’s in a light coma but should pull through,” Bruce told him. “More importantly, whatever happened to her may have something to do with HIVE or some other group with a similar MO.”

“You know about them?” Queen asked.

“A bit; not much,” Bruce admitted. “All we know is they’re some kind of shadow group that employs mind control and either kills or wipes the memories of anyone who crosses them. However I’ve never heard of them working this overtly before.”

Queen nodded. “We also investigated a scientist by the name of Twombey who came up with a mind control drug he used for corporate espionage. He’d drug other scientists, business leaders,
anyone who could get him valuable information to further his goals, then wipe their memories and
patent their products or use the information they gave him for some other sort of financial gain. We
looked for a connection between Twombey and HIVE but came up empty. That said, ARGUS was
also looking into HIVE and took Twombey into custody after my team captured him but what any of
that has to do with Lois Lane or the Miller situation I have no idea.”

“I think Orbital might have something to do with this as well,” Bruce said carefully.

//Orbital?// Dick asked in alarm.

“As in the same people who have Felicity?” Luke asked darkly.

“Yes.”

“And how do you know that Orbital is involved?” Queen asked in a dangerous undercurrent.

“I don’t, not for sure,” Bruce admitted reluctantly. “I met up with two masks, associates of mine who
are inside Orbital with Felicity; Wildcat Grant and Tatsu Yamashiro, an operator who works under
the codename Katana. They said that there was something strange going on at Orbital and that the
head of the organization, a woman named Miranda Tate, was investigating HIVE but they can’t
seem to find proof that any such investigation exists. In the mean time they’ve been noticing some
strange activity and discrepancies within the organization.” Bruce leaned forward placing his hands
on his knees. “Also, according to Felicity, Orbital has been recruiting field operators, most of whom
have something to do with both of our teams.”

Queen’s expression hardened, “Who?”

“I already mentioned Katana and Wildcat and you know about the Canary already. She also
mentioned Lyla Michaels…”

“Diggle’s ex,” he inserted.

Bruce nodded, “Huntress.”

The other man tensed, “Helena is with Felicity right now?”

“Isn’t she that psycho who hunts mobsters with a crossbow?” Luke asked sharply.

Bruce turned to Felicity’s brother, anticipating his next reaction. Before the other man could go off in
a tangent again, he spoke, “She and Felicity got into a scrap this morning but Felicity handled it and,
according to Wildcat, somehow managed to put her down hard,” he told them. “Nevertheless, I tried
to get her to stay away from Orbital but she said she was going in no matter what. I even threatened
to handcuff her and lock her in the apartment but she wouldn’t budge.”

“I don’t like this,” Luke said tersely.

“I’m not too thrilled about it either but you know what your sister is like when she has her mind set
on something,” Bruce said in an aggrieved tone. “However, Wildcat has agreed to stick close to her
and both Katana and Canary are with her along with the rest of their team who she assures me can be
trusted. If Huntress tries anything they’ll take care of it.”

“Who else did she say was connected to Orbital?” Queen asked, his thumb and forefinger rolling
against each other in what Bruce assumed was a nervous tic.

“Besides Isabel Rochev and Felicity herself, two other operators; one calling herself ‘Gypsy’ and
another called ‘Manhunter’.”

“Laurel,” Oliver said is surprise, then added, “Laurel Lance, my ex-girlfriend and Sara’s sister; she goes by the handle ‘Manhunter’ now.”

“What about Gypsy; her civilian identity is Cynthia Reynolds?”

“I don’t know her,” Queen said, shaking his head. He turned to Luke, “What about you?”

“No,” Luke said after a moment’s contemplation.

//Did you say her handle was Gypsy?// Dick asked sharply.

“Yes,” Bruce told him. “What do you know?”

//Not much. A member of my team called Cyborg ran into a meta-human calling herself ‘Gypsy’ a few months ago who was on the run from an ARGUS lock up. He tried to convince her to come in out of the cold but she disappeared. He tried looking for her but kept running into dead ends. He even broke through ARGUS’s firewalls to see if she’d been recaptured but she was a ghost.//

“What do you mean she was a ghost?” Bruce asked sharply.

“//I mean that either Waller erased her records or someone else did. She wasn’t in their system even though Cyborg insists she was telling the truth.// He paused, //It may be a bit of a tenuous connection, but if it is the same girl then Felicity might be right and this organization is specifically trying to draw both teams in.//

“Why would they do that though?” Queen said angrily. “Other than Felicity there’s nothing that would link our teams together.”


“No,” Bruce told them. “Huntress only made contact a few weeks ago and, according to Katana, Orbital had planned on offering the Directorship to Felicity three months ago which means they’ve been tracking her long before that connection came about.”

Queen’s posture stiffened, “That’s not right. Isabel only approached Felicity a few weeks ago.”

“Why would they be targeting Felicity?” Luke said in confusion.

“They can’t be; they’d have no reason to,” Queen said dismissively.

“Could it be related to the thing with Slade?” Bruce asked dismissively.

He shook his head, “I couldn’t see how, besides that was six months ago and if they were connected with Slade then I’d be the target, not her.” Oliver paused, “None of this makes sense though,” he muttered. “What the hell could they want and why bring our teams together like this? What would be the point? And what does this have to do with Miller? It couldn’t be about the contract, could it? That’s the only other thing connecting us but the defense contract doesn’t even have anything to do with our missions; it’s just business.”

“Orbital is in direct competition with ARGUS; maybe that’s the connection,” Bruce suggested. “Your team has worked closely with them in the past and my team has had a few less than friendly encounters with Waller’s agents.”

“Waller isn’t in a position of power anymore though, Trevor is,” Oliver told him. “And why would
ARGUS care about Lane or some dirty politician?"

“I don’t know but I’m sure as hell going to find out,” Bruce said grimly.
Chapter Forty-Five

Fuck butterflies, Felicity told herself as she entered the elevator to Orbital alone for the very first time. It felt as though an entire herd of elephants were stomping around in her stomach instead.

Moment of truth, she thought as she approached the sensor. She really hoped she logged her
passcodes correctly. She’d been a bit off when Tatsu handed her the tablet that morning and, between Helena nearly ringing her bell and her lack of sleep, she very well may have made a typo. In a place that had snipers on the roofline and full-body scanners, who knew what a simple misspelled password might lead to. Or even worse, if that damn autocorrect feature had been turned on. The very thought of that, along with memories of past misadventures caused by the less than helpful text and typing feature, had her suddenly feeling very nervous indeed. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d been burned by autocorrect but it could very well be the last. For all she knew that laser netting could fry her just because the stupid autocorrect feature decided to input ‘Star Wing’ or ‘Darling’ instead of what she’d intended to enter as her handy dandy new handle.

“Autocorrect sucks,” she muttered. She made a policy of disabling that feature on all of her devices now.

The straw that broke the camel’s back came about while she was on a dinner run. She texted Thea about her order and, instead of asking her if she wanted ‘apple vinaigrette’ for her salad, it autocorrected it to ‘asshole vinaigrette’. Of course, Roy ran with it and the next day Oliver was asking her why there was a bottle of Newman’s Own salad dressing in the mini fridge with his picture taped over it.

That was awkward. It was all she could do to keep a straight face every time she watched him eat salad after that.

//Please stand by for entry code and scan.//

She took a deep breath, visions of an Indiana Jones-type death and dismemberment situation flashed before her as her eye targeted the optical scanner, “Code Starling."

//Identity Confirmed. Please stand by for scan.//

“Oh good, that’s a relief. Guess that means no rolling boulders or embarrassing monikers for me this time, Short Round,” she muttered as the laser net came down.

//Confirmed. Good Evening Director. Beginning descent.//

She grinned, “Cool. And a good evening to you too, polite elevator voice,” she chuckled. Nerve wracking as all of this was, she could really get used to that part.

Oh please, don’t be a den of villainous bad guys, she thought. If there has to be a bad guy then at least let me keep the coffee.

And the cool elevator voice.

And the office.

Hell, just let me keep the whole thing and make the bad guys move for once.

She exited the elevator and immediately noticed Huntress and Sara were squaring off in the middle of the training area and, from the looks on both of their faces, it wasn’t to trade cookie recipes.

She took a deep breath, this was definitely a fudge dipped Oreo kind of day.

Damn, she really needed to stop by the store on her way home. Now she had cookies on the brain.

Well, who wouldn’t have Oreos on the brain after the day she’d had? Whoever invented those things was a frickin’ genius; especially the mint ones. The only thing better than a cookie is another cookie;
slap ‘em together with some creamy goodness and oh hell yes.

She winced as she looked at the very angry expression on her friend’s face. Sara was gone and in her place stood a very pissed off Canary which usually meant someone was about to get brained by a Bo staff and Helena’s expression wasn’t exactly sunshine and bunnies either.

If she wound up getting her ass kicked twice in one day because of this crap then, fuck it, she was eating the whole freaking bag of cookies, swear to God. Goddamn Helena; good thing Bruce was an ass man because if this was going to be her new normal then between the Ben and Jerry’s stress binges, her abandonment of her regular workout routine, and her recent Oreo fixation there was going to be a whole lot more of it to love.

“Sara,” she said as she approached them, hitching her bag higher onto her shoulder and adjusting her grip on her garment bag on the off chance this turned into a tussle. “What’s going—umph!”

Sara took one look at her and in the blink of an eye had her hands on her cheeks and pulled her into a lip lock causing her to drop everything in her arms.

A rather uncomfortable lip lock because A) even though the swelling had gone down on her bottom lip, it still hurt like hell and B) as good as a kisser as Sara was, Felicity wasn’t used to having her friend’s tongue in her mouth.

“Hey beautiful,” Sara said, pulling away with a smirk. “Miss me?”

Felicity cleared her throat, “Um, yeah,” she dropped her voice to a whisper, “Is Isabel here?”

“No.”

She looked at her in confusion, and whispered, “Then why did you just kiss me like that?”

“Well, we needed to sell the story just in case the place is wired,” she told her. “Plus, I just kind of wanted to. Triple Word Score, remember?”

She rolled her eyes at her and pulled away, “You’re impossible.”

“No, I’m not; in fact, just say the word and I’m completely probable. In fact, I’m a sure thing,” she smiled at her but then frowned as she brought her fingers up to gently probe her split lip causing Felicity to wince, “Helena do this to you?”

“Yeah, but did you check out what I did to her?” She said in a self-satisfied murmur.

Helena was looking at them with an air of nonchalance even though her eyes, ‘Her two black eyes,’ Felicity thought smugly, were taking in their apparent intimacy with keen interest. The delicate skin around the other woman’s eyes was bruised as was the bridge of her nose and there was a bandage across the top. She might look a little worse for wear but Helena looked like sheer pure hell.

She winced as that last thought caused the cut on her bottom lip to pull sharply. She really needed to learn to smile on the inside because if she kept it up, between Sara’s seduction attempts and Helena’s face, she’d wind up opening up her lip again and getting blood all over her suit.

“Hmm, I did,” Sara murmured in approval before turning to look back at Huntress. “However I’m still going to kick her ass for touching you in the first place,” she said in a voice loud enough for the other woman to hear.

“Bring it Tweety,” Helena said with a sneer. “And what’s the deal with you and Blondie? Oh I
taught I taw a puddy tat; I did, I did tee a puddy tat and I could have sworn Oliver Queen was the one tapping that tat,” she said in a mocking tone. “In fact, last I heard both of you were giving Oliver all the puddy he could handle.”

Sara started towards the other woman and Felicity stopped her by placing a firm hand on her arm. She then stepped away from Sara and towards Huntress, “I thought you and I discussed this earlier, Helena; or do I need to remind you of the terms of your employment here?”

Helena’s eyes raked her figure in a dismissive way, “Just having a little fun, boss.”

“Cool it,” Felicity warned her.

“Or what?” She asked with a sneer.

“Or I’ll say to hell with office morale, that’s what,” she told her with a hard look.

Huntress’s eyes flickered, “Fine, whatever. It was just a joke; no need to get all bitchy about it.”

Felicity gave Helena one last dirty look before reaching down for her bag and, seeing her wince as the muscles across her ribs began to protest, Sara grabbed it for her along with her garment bag. “So where is this famous office of yours, Cutie?” She asked, not handing over the bags.

“Over here,” she told her then led her over to the large office nearest the control room.

Wildcat, who had apparently been watching the whole scene play out from a distance walked over to follow them inside. “I gotta say, the show you gals put on out there was well worth the price of admission, that’s for sure,” he said with a grin as he shut the door behind him.

“Who’s the pervy old guy?” Sara asked, the flirtatious upturn of her lips and appreciative eye she ran over his fit form taking the sting out of her words and causing the other man’s answering grin to broaden considerably.

Up until now, she thought Sara was the friskiest person she’d ever met; the woman dropped sexual innuendoes like people from LA dropped names. She’d only known Wildcat for less than a day and already it was pretty obvious that he could give her a run for her money. He was a consummate flirt so putting them together in the same room should prove fairly interesting.

Or it would be if she weren’t still suffering from sleep deprivation and it didn’t feel like someone had stomped on her face. As it was she so wasn’t in the mood to bear witness to an epic mutual chat up session between the two biggest flirts she’d ever met.

“Sara, meet Wildcat Grant,” she said introducing them with as she took her duffle and garment bag and hung them in the closet. “Wildcat, this is Sara Lance aka Black Canary.”

“So you’re the Canary, huh?” Wildcat said taking her hand in a firm shake while his eyes swept over her form in a way that made it obvious that despite his advanced years he still considered himself to be a player.

…And since his ‘advanced years’ didn’t really look all that advanced he probably *was* a player, Felicity thought with an internal snort. His unique condition had slowed his aging to a crawl while apparently amping up his libido. Instead of calling himself ‘Wildcat’ he should have picked ‘Tomcat’ as a handle.

“And you’re Wildcat Grant,” she returned with a languid stare. “Nice to meet the legend in the flesh.”
“Pleasure’s all mine,” he said with a wink.

“Not yet, but it could be if you play your cards right,” Sara said, returning the flirt.

His eyes glittered in amusement and he moved a bit closer, “Speaking of playing your cards right; honey, you look better than a deck with six aces. Always did have a thing for blondes.”

“I thought you told me blondes were trouble,” Felicity pointed out.

“Yeah,” he said, not taking his eyes off of Sara. “And I was always good at stirring up trouble. You know what they say, honey; ‘beautiful’ has U in it, but ‘quickie’ has U & I together.”

“I don’t know,” Sara said with a purr, obviously getting into the playful spirit of things. “I don’t think you could handle me, Pops; after all, you know what they say about old dogs and new tricks.”

“I might be an old dog but I can still bury a bone with the best of ‘em,” he tossed back.

“Oh my God,” Felicity muttered as she went to put on a pot of coffee. She definitely needed caffeine if she was going to have to deal with these two.

“What happens if you OD on Viagra?” She asked him with an easygoing chuckle.

“You die with a smile on your face,” he returned with a twinkle. “Why do blondes wear underwear?”

“To keep their ankles warm. What’s the difference between Niagara and Viagra?” Sara countered.

“Niagara falls.” He grinned. “How do you turn a blonde into a brunette?”

“Get her to stand on her head. Why is Viagra like Disney World?”

“Because it’s a one hour wait for a two minute ride. Did you hear the one about the blonde with the PhD?”

“Yeah,” Sara said. “They say she’ll blow your mind, too.”

Felicity dropped her chin to her chest and groaned, “Okay, speaking as the only blonde in the room who actually has a PhD, can you guys please stop? At least pause it until after the coffee finishes brewing?” She flipped it on and watched as black gold began to drip into the carafe.

They ignored her. Naturally.

“Why do they give people in nursing homes Viagra?”

“So they don’t roll out of bed. Two blondes fell down a hole. One said, ‘It’s dark in here isn’t it?’ The other replied--?”

"I don't know; I can't see. What are the two main ingredients in Viagra?”

Felicity opened the mini-fridge and scanned the contents fruitlessly. Should have figured a woman who stocked her office with artisanal cream and coffee from the gods wouldn’t have anything as déclassé as a freaking Oreo in her snack stash but you’d think she’d have something. Hell, at this point she’d settle for anything she could get; an old bran muffin, a handful of cereal—as long as it had sugar in it, she didn’t care.

“Miracle Gro and Fix-A-Flat. Why couldn’t the blonde dial 911?”
She opened the crisper drawer and saw the prepackaged salads, low fat crackers, and a large container of hummus.

Almost anything. Where the hell was the chocolate? Who the hell stocked their office fridge with hummus but no chocolate?

Who the hell stocked hummus in their office fridge to begin with? It was hummus.

“She couldn’t find the eleven button. What happens when you take Prozac instead of Viagra?”

“Yuck,” she muttered. “Hummus is like the tofu of dips.” She pawed through the bags of salad until she found what she was looking for. Snatching the small bag of red foil wrapped Lindor truffles she did a mental fist pump. “Yes! I knew there had to be chocolate in here somewhere. Anyone with this much healthy crap laying around has to have a secret chocolate stash.” She took one of the chocolates out of the wrapper and popped in in her mouth with a self-satisfied sigh.

“You stop giving a fuck. What do you call a blonde with pigtails?”

“A blowjob with handlebars. Two old guys are sitting on a park bench when one of them says—”

“Okay, I’m done,” Felicity said turning on them. “Get out of my office before I have you both shot.”

“Spoilsport,” Sara said, sticking out her tongue.

“You’re all right, honey,” Wildcat said, sidling up to her.

“You’re not too shabby yourself, Pops,” Sara said, leaning up against Felicity’s desk.

“God help us,” Felicity muttered as she poured herself a cup of coffee and added some of the thick heavy cream before taking a deep swallow of caffeine Nirvana and moaned. “Oh yeah, that’s the stuff.”

“Mind if I grab a cup?” Wildcat asked looking at her blissful expression. “Anything that can get a woman to make a sound like that is worth trying at least once.”

“Only once, Pops?” Sara asked him with a naughty glint.

“Once is all it takes if you do it right the first time, honey,” he told her with another wink as he poured himself a cup, forgoing both the cream and sugar. “Anyway, I was just going to tell you that—damn!” He said looking down at the cup appreciatively.

“I know, right?” Felicity said sitting down at the desk and taking another sip from her cup, “It’s like coffee and crack had a love child and this is the result.”

“That good, huh?” Sara asked, eyeing her cup speculatively. Felicity no sooner put her cup down before the other woman snatched it up and took a sip.

“You know, you could have gotten your own cup,” she told her in consternation.

“I’ve had this before,” Sara told her, handing it back.

“You have?” She asked, perking up slightly. “I meant to ask Miranda what blend it was and where she bought it but I didn’t get a chance.”

“I don’t know where she got it from but it tastes really similar to Ladakh Butter Tea.”
“Don’t taste like tea to me,” Wildcat said taking another sip.

“Nyssa called it that but it’s not,” Sara told him. “Most butter tea is made with actual tea but she preferred to make it with coffee instead and used to drink it all the time. It’s basically Yemenite coffee that’s been roasted with salt and pepper in Po Cha, then, instead of milk, they add more Po Cha as a creamer. It’s what gives it that rich nutty mocha flavor.”

“What’s Po Cha?” Wildcat asked as he continued to drink from his cup.

“Salted Yak butter.”

Wildcat choked at that and sputtered while Felicity froze, her cup stopping just short of her lips, “Yak butter?”

“Not a lot of cows in Nanda Parbat,” she said with a shrug. “Of course, it doesn’t taste quite the same with cream but it’s still okay.”

Wildcat cleared his throat, then took another careful sip, “Okay, so no Yak butter then?”

“I doubt it,” she told him. “Unless, of course, this Miranda person does her coffee shopping in Tibet. Chances are it’s some kind of Ethiopian or Kenyan blend since they’re pretty similar.”

Felicity put down her cup carefully, suddenly no longer interested in finishing it. “Um, okay; what is it you were saying?” She asked, looking towards Wildcat who was still eyeing his own cup suspiciously but still drinking it nonetheless.

“Oh, uh, Katana and I met with Bruce--.”

Felicity held out her hand in a stop gesture then swirled her finger in the air angrily. “What’s…” he mimicked her frantic gesticulations, “supposed to mean?”

“Bugs,” Sara offered helpfully.

“Yeah, okay,” he said nodding. “Katana had Gypsy sweep for ‘em then had her little buddy, Melvin the tech guy, run a security update as soon as we walked in here to take the ones she found offline for a while. As soon as we leave he has to ‘reboot the system’, or whatever the hell they call it, but for now we’re good. Also it’s not somethin’ we can do a whole lot so from here on out we’re gonna have to meet somewhere a little bit more on the down low.”

“Okay,” Felicity said slowly then turned to look behind her and into the control room, “Um, which one is Melvin? That guy?” She pointed to a sandy haired guy in his twenties wearing a polo shirt and khakis who had wandered over to talk to the tall raven-haired girl she recognized as ‘Gypsy’.

“Naw, that’s Dave somethin’ or other. That’s Melvin,” Wildcat said pointing to another tech who was glaring at ‘Dave’ from his place in front of the monitors.

“That guy’s name is Melvin?” Sara said from beside her.

She couldn’t blame her. ‘Melvin’ looked like some kind of strange Emo/Goth/Muscle-Geek hybrid with ripped black jeans, a ‘Bad Omen’ graphic tee with a picture of a demented clown, heavy framed glasses spiked hair in black, blue, and hot pink, and both his ears had been gauged and stretched with holes that were easily half an inch or so in circumference. To top the look off, he had full sleeve tattoos running up both his arms and a neck tattoo of two bloody fang marks near his carotid.
“Oh,” Felicity said quietly.

Wildcat made a dismissive noise, “He tries to get you to call him ‘Mordred, Lord of Death’ or somethin’ but I just call him Melvin.” He chuckled, “Pisses him off, too boy.” He glanced at him again through the one-way mirrored glass, “I don’t get it, y’know? Why do that to your body? He’s got two big huge holes in his ears and tats up, down and sideways all over his body. I mean, back in my day when a guy got a tat it was ‘cause he was in the military or just got out of the joint. Even then it was somethin’ like a hula girl or an anchor or somethin’; I mean, what the hell is with all those bug eyed Japanese cartoon girls and the vampire shit?”

Felicity cleared her throat and turned back around, “Okay, so what did you and Bruce talk about?”

“Mostly about the weird stuff that’s been goin’ down here,” he told her.

“Like what?” Sara asked, propping her hip on the corner of Felicity’s desk.

“Just different stuff,” he said moving to sit on the arm of the heavy leather chair in front so he could face both of them while he drank his coffee. “Nothing concrete but a lot of little crap that just seem hinky as hell, y’know? Like them ‘recruits’ Lyla keeps ferrying back and forth for one.”

“What recruits?” She asked. “Like vigilantes or--?”

“Naw, they ain’t masks,” he told her. “I mean them Amazon gals like they got on the roof doing sniper duty. Somethin’s off about ‘em.”

“Amazons?” Felicity asked dubiously.

“Yeah, I clocked them when we drove up,” Sara said with a frown.

“Lyla brings ‘em in from some weird island and they get send out as ‘ground support’, whatever the hell that means. Miranda told Katana that she was runnin’ an op against HIVE and it was all ‘need to know’, but somethin’ just ain’t right about ‘em.”

“HIVE?” Felicity interjected.

“Yeah,” he told her. “Only Tatsu can’t find any proof of an op other than Miranda’s word and the Amazons.”

“What’s going on, Cutie?” Sara asked, studying her expression carefully.

“Lois Lane collapsed this afternoon during the Senate hearing before she could turn over the evidence she had against Miller. Not only that but someone hacked into the Daily Planet’s server and completely erased all of her files,” she told them. “What else have you guys noticed about these ‘Amazons’?”

“They don’t act right,” Wildcat told her. “They don’t talk for one and they just seem like they’re off.”

“What do you mean ‘off’?” Sara asked sharply.

“Sort of mechanical-like. I been callin’ ‘em ‘fem-bots’ because they just kind of stare through ya when you try to talk to ‘em.”

Sara gave her a pointed look and Felicity bit her bottom lip then winced. Yeah, as long as her lip was bruised she’d have to remember not to do that anymore, “That sounds similar to something we’ve seen before actually. What other stuff have you guys noticed?”
“More than what I can say in the time we got left,” he hitched his chin towards the control room where Gypsy was tapping her watch pointedly.

“I may be having dinner with Isabel tonight but I’ll call you later and we can meet up and talk,” she told him.

Sara scowled, “Why the hell are you having dinner with little Miss Vasily Immabitch?”

Felicity paused, “Wait, was that one of mine?”

“No, yours was, ‘Isa-bitch Ho-chev’.”

Wildcat snorted, “Good one.”

Felicity gave her a long-suffering look, “Since you and I are having a big lesbian break-up, Isabel wants to be the next one to fly the Sapphic skies with me as her co-pilot. I told her I only do relationships so, as a result, she’s planning on seducing me later after she gets me all liquored up.”

Wildcat’s eyebrows shot up into his hairline and Sara’s scowl deepened, “Yeah, but you and I aren’t really breaking up; we’re just taking a break, remember? I gave that whole speech about how you were still my bitch and that I was the only one allowed to grab your ass.”

At that Wildcat moved to sit in the leather armchair and got very comfortable.

“Well, I told her we broke up because you cheated on me with Oliver,” she explained.

“When did I do that?” Sara asked, offended.

“I don’t know,” she said in exasperation. “I guess it happened a few months ago.”

“Well, in that case I want a do-over,” Sara told her with a black look.

“A do-over?” Felicity asked slowly.

“Yeah; a do-over,” Sara told her with a frown. “Tell her you’re giving me a do-over so I can prove my love by romancing the crap out of you and that we’re trying to work things out.”

“Yeah, but if I get back together with you then what about Isabel?”

“Fuck Isabel,” Sara snorted.

“I wasn’t planning on taking it that far actually,” Felicity shot back.

“Funny,” Sara said with a grimace then paused, “Wait, how far were you planning on going with her?”

“Tongue and maybe a little boob,” Felicity said off-handedly. “I haven’t decided yet.”

Wildcat took another sip of coffee and grinned.

Sara’s mouth fell open and she turned to her with a hurt expression, “You were going to let *her* get to second base? You wouldn’t even let me get to second base. Even when we went to bed together you made me stay on my side.”

“That’s because your feet felt like ice cubes!” She told her.
“Your house was drafty,” Sara argued. “It was like sleeping in a goddamn wind tunnel!”

“And I told you to put on some socks before you got into the bed if you were cold.”

“You never made Thea put on socks when you slept with her!”

“That’s because sleeping with Thea was like having a goddamn furnace under the covers,” Felicity shot back. “You, on the other hand, suck all of the heat out of the bed.”

The older man got up and poured himself another cup of coffee.

“Are you really going to let Isabel get into your cookie jar?” Sara demanded.

“Cookie jar,” Wildcat muttered to himself with a headshake. “That’s a new one.”

“No!” She told her, “I don’t know! Maybe a little bit; just a cookie crumb, not the whole cookie…”

she made an irritated noise, “You know you’re being ridiculous, right?”

Sara frowned sullenly and looked away, “I just figured that if you were going to ever have sex with another girl it would be with me. You said I had dibs, remember?”

“Yeah, after six shots of tequila and four more shots of whatever the hell it was Thea made me drink.”

“Red-headed Sluts.”

Wildcat choked, “What?”

She blinked, “What?”

“The drink; it’s called a Red-headed Slut,” Sara sulked. “Two parts cranberry juice, one part peach schnapps, and one part Jägermeister.” She glowered at her, “And I still can’t believe that you’d make me cheat on you with Ollie then go on a rebound date with the Cold War Cunt. That hurts; seriously.”

“Red-headed Sluts, Cold War Cunts, cookie jars; damn, I love working here,” Wildcat mumbled into his cup.

“You’re still my designated bi-curious stage, I promise,” she said with as much sincerity as she could muster.

“Okay, but I still don’t like it,” she said with a pouty scowl.

“I know,” Felicity told her with a small smile. “I still love you, though.”

“I love you, too,” Sara said dourly. “You still owe me though. I can’t believe you’d tell that woman I cheated on you. For the record I would never do that.”

“I know,” Felicity said, getting up from her chair to move around and give her a hug.

Sara wrapped her arms around her and pulled her in close before muttering, “You totally owe me for this. Seriously; as soon as this is done you’re having sex with me to make up for it.”

Felicity pulled back and gave her a look.

“It was worth a shot,” Sara shrugged.
“Not to interrupt, because I am totally enjoying this whole scene,” Wildcat said dryly, “but does Bruce know about this?” He said gesturing between the two of them, “Because, if he does, I’m seriously going to have to take back everything I ever said about him being an uptight dickhead with a stick jammed firmly up his ass and buy that man a drink.”

Felicity rolled her eyes and leaned on the edge of the desk next to Sara, “Speaking of Isabel, she should be here soon with some mystery recruit.”

“Who?” Sara frowned.

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “She said it was a surprise so I figure it’s someone we know.”

Wildcat spoke up, “Katana said the new recruit’s handle is—”

“Manhunter,” Sara supplied.

“How did you know?” He asked.

Sara hitched her chin toward the elevators and they turned to watch as Laurel entered Cyber-Ops with Isabel close behind. “Shit,” she said with a scowl. “I haven’t even officially met her yet and I can tell you right now that I really hate Isabel.”

“Get in line,” Felicity said resignedly. “How do you want to play this?”

“I don’t know,” she said and got up to meet them. “Guess we roll with it.”

“Roll with it,” Felicity said unenthusiastically. “Gee, why didn’t I think of that?”

“Who is she?” Wildcat asked quietly as they exited her office and headed toward where Isabel was introducing Laurel to the rest of the team.

“Sara’s sister,” she told him.

“And that’s bad?” Wildcat asked with an arched eyebrow.

“You could say that,” she pasted on a fake smile and walked up to the group. “Isabel.”

“Felicity; or should I say ‘Starling’ now,” Isabel turned to greet her, a slightly unpleasant smile playing around her lips as her eyes flickered towards Sara who was standing beside her. “And, of course, Canary. I’ve so been looking forward to meeting you in person.”

“I’ll just bet,” Sara said with false gaiety.

“Starling and Canary?” Helena snorted from where she was standing in the corner. “Cute. Maybe I should change my name to ‘Nightingale’?”

“More like ‘Cuckoo’,” Sara said giving her a hard look.

“On second thought, songbirds aren’t really my style,” Huntress said setting her stance into a deceptively casual pose. “I’m more of a bird of prey kind of girl. Maybe I should pick something a little more predatory like, ‘Hawk’ or ‘Falcon’?”

“Or maybe Vulture?” Sara suggested as they squared off again.

Felicity cleared her throat and stepped forward to defuse the situation. She gave Helena and Sara each a quelling look before turning back to the group, “Hello Laurel.”
“Felicity,” Laurel nodded then looked over to her sister, “Hi Sara.”

“Laurel,” Sara returned evenly, still keeping one eye fixed on Helena. “What are you doing here?”

“Isabel recruited me,” she told them. “She said that Orbital was starting a team here in Gotham and I figured it was a chance to make a fresh start. Besides, when she told me that you, Felicity, and Lyla were here I thought it’d be nice to be part of a team again.”

“I kind of wish you’d called me first; I could have picked you up from the airport,” even though Sara’s expression never changed, Felicity could see the slight tightening around her lips that belied her calm exterior.

“Isabel sent a car,” she told her.

“That was nice of her,” the other woman said, flicking her eyes back to the woman in question.

“Not at all,” Isabel said with icy politeness. “It was my pleasure.”

I’ll just bet, Felicity thought to herself as she pasted on a small polite smile that didn’t pull at her lip too much. “Isabel, could I have a word with you in private, please? I just need a second. It’ll give Laurel a little time to introduce herself to the rest of the team and let her and Sara catch up.”

“Oh course,” Isabel said with dark glittering eyes as she cut one last look towards Sara before stepping away from the group.

Felicity walked into her office with Isabel close behind. As soon as the other woman closed the door behind her, she spoke, “Are you sure bringing Laurel in is wise?” She asked, getting right down to brass tacks.

“You don’t have a personal issue with Ms. Lance, do you?” She asked with feigned innocence.

Felicity tamped down her annoyance. “Laurel is a recovering drug addict and alcoholic. She’s also fresh out of a psychiatric facility because she had to be treated for bipolar psychosis.”

“All problems she has well in hand,” Isabel said smoothly. “She disclosed all of those issues with us and is taking medication for her illness. I really don’t see a problem.”

“You don’t see the problem with having someone who recently had a nervous breakdown working in the field as an operator?” She asked with a note of incredulity.

“And as you said, most masks have their fair share of quirks,” Isabel told her. “Ms. Lance seems to think she can handle it but, to be on the safe side, we can keep her here on a trial basis and avoid giving her any field assignments until she’s been thoroughly put through her paces; fair enough?” She looked at her with a hint of calculation in her eyes, “Unless you have a personal objection to her joining the team after all?”

Fuck. “No, of course not,” she lied.

“Good,” Isabel said smoothly. “Now unless there’s anything else…?”

“Actually, there is,” Felicity told her. “My plans for this evening have changed and I was wondering if you still wanted to have dinner later?”

“Really?” Isabel asked archly.

“Hmm,” Felicity said, easing toward her. “I thought we could get that bottle of wine you mentioned
and get to know one another a little better.”

Isabel’s eyes raked over her figure as her eyes glowed warmly, “Oh? What exactly did you have in mind?”

Felicity swallowed the butterflies that were attempting to free themselves from her stomach and placed her hand lightly on the other woman’s arm as she looked at her through a dark fall of lashes. “I figured I’d just put myself in your hands for the night and see where it takes us.”

Felicity resisted the urge to groan. God that was cheesy as hell, she thought. Mata Hari she was not. However, the other woman was apparently falling for it because her smile widened as she reached her hand out to brush a stray curl behind her ear, “I think that can be arranged,” she purred. Her eyes dropped down to ease over her figure again, “I like your suit. Very flattering; in fact, I think I like this one even better than the one you had on earlier.”

“If you like this outfit you’re going to love the one I picked to wear to dinner later,” Felicity promised her.

Isabel arched one finely shaped eyebrow, “I’m sure I will.” She ran a manicured finger under the split in her lip and asked, “The swelling appears to have gone down quite a bit.”

She resisted the urge to flinch away and smiled carefully so as not to pull at the cut, “It’s still sore but I took some Ibuprofen before I left my apartment so hopefully it will kick in soon.”

“I hope so,” Isabel said in a seductive timbre. Alrighty then. Suddenly she was really rethinking the whole ‘first base’ thing.

There was a tap at the door and then it opened as Laurel stuck her head inside. “Hi; sorry to interrupt, but I was wondering if I could have a minute to talk to Felicity if that’s okay?”

“Oh course,” Isabel said, her usual cool smile slipping back into place. “I’ll go ahead and brief the rest of the team on the mission while you two catch up.” She turned to Felicity again, “I’ll see you both out there when you’re done.”

“Oh course,” Felicity said. As she caught the look of dark intent Isabel threw her just before the door shut she thought, ‘The wining and dining part better be worth it or she was going to be really pissed. Plus there better be dancing involved somewhere down the line. If she was going to basically whore herself out for the mission then somebody better make it worth her while!’

After the other woman left she turned to Laurel.

Out of the fire and into the frying pan.

“Do you want a cup of coffee or anything?” Felicity offered uncomfortably.

“Coffee?” Laurel asked, perking up slightly as her eyes found the pot. “Yeah, thanks; I’d love some.” Felicity started toward it and she cut her off, “No, I’ll get it.”

“Oh kay,” she said before going to sit on the leather couch and waiting for Laurel to join her. “There’s cream in the fridge.”

“Thanks,” she said, reaching in the fridge then pouring herself a cup before coming to sit across from
her in one of the chairs. She held the coffee mug in her hands, cupping it as if to absorb its warmth as she looked at her a bit uncertainly, “Um, what happened to your…?” She gestured to her own mouth with one of her fingers.

“Helena,” Felicity said clumsily. “We’d sparred a little this morning and, well…”

“Yeah, I noticed her nose,” she said with a nod. “Nice.”

“Thanks.” Felicity shifted uncomfortably in her seat, “So…”

Laurel grimaced and stared down at the mug in her hands, “Yeah, awkward.”

Both women began to speak simultaneously.

“Um, how have you--?”

“I wanted to tell you--”

“You first,” Felicity offered, her eyes looking anywhere but at the woman across from her.

“I wanted to, um, apologize…” Laurel began quietly.

“No need,” Felicity said quickly.

“No, I do; I need to apologize,” she said firmly. “I was way the hell out of line the last time we spoke and I need to make amends.”

“Yeah, well, it’s water under the bridge,” she said waving her off and exhaling a nervous breath. “Besides, you wrote me that letter; we’re good.”

“Felicity,” she put the cup on the low table between them and leaned forward, her brow furrowed, “I know you never read the letter.”

She felt a hot flush crawl up her neck, “Oh. So you know…?” Laurel nodded. “Um, who…?” She flinched, “It wasn’t your dad, was it? Because I meant to read it, I just--”

Laurel shook her head, “No, no one told me.” She hesitated and rubbed her hands together nervously, “Um, after my dad dropped me off at the Central City Healing Center I sort took off.”

She blinked in surprise, “You left the facility?”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I didn’t really think I needed to go and I was kind of pissed off about the fact that my parents were treating me like I was a child. It sort of felt like I was being grounded or something, so I just left. I never checked in.”

Felicity gave her a confused look, “But your dad and Sara said…”

“No, I mean I went, just not that night,” she told her. “After he dropped me off though I just walked right back out and caught a cab. I rented a car and just drove; I wound up back at the Foundry. I don’t even know why.” She sighed, “I was just really, really angry and I wanted to prove that I wasn’t crazy so I… I don’t know,” she picked up her cup. “I was looking for you actually. I think part of me thought it was your fault all of that was happening to me and that if I confronted you it would somehow make it so I… look, I don’t know what I thought. I wasn’t exactly thinking rationally at that point and,” she took a sip from her cup, “I just thought—holy crap that’s good.” She breathed looking down into her cup. “Oh my God.” She took another drink and moaned.
“Yeah, it’s…pretty good coffee, um…” Felicity said weakly. She scratched her head in confusion, “So wait, you went back to the Foundry for me?”

“Yeah,” Laurel said between sips. “Oh God, I am in love with this coffee,” she said with another moan. “If this was a person I would totally marry it and have its baby.”

“Yeah, it’s, um…” she stopped as Laurel drained her cup in several gulps, “good.” She blinked, “Do you…do you want some more?”

“Oh yeah,” Laurel said worshipfully as she jumped up to refill her cup.

“Okay,” she bit her bottom lip again and winced. “Damn, I really have to stop doing that,” she muttered.

Laurel opened the fridge to reach for the cream and froze. “Is that chocolate?”

She looked over at the red bag of truffles she was pointing to, “Uh, yeah. Did you want a piece?”

“Can I--?” She asked hopefully.

“Knock yourself out,” Felicity said suddenly wondering if perhaps she needed to call someone…like Sara or maybe the men in white coats with the butterfly nets.

Why they always showed the crazy people wranglers as holding butterfly nets she had no idea but she had a feeling she might be in need of a few herself soon.

Laurel quickly unwrapped a piece of chocolate, popped it in her mouth, and let loose with a low, throaty moan as her head fell back and her expression melted into one of pure ecstasy.

Her jaw dropped, “Oh wow, and I thought I liked chocolate. Um…?”

Laurel filled her cup then held up the bag of chocolates, “Is it okay if I take these over to the table.”

“Yeah, sure,” Felicity said quickly. “Mi chocolate es su…chocolate.”

Laurel say back down and quickly unwrapped another piece popping it in her mouth with another almost obscene moan, “Oh my God, you have no idea how good this is.”

Felicity stared at her nervously, “I can guess…”

“Did you know that caffeine is a stimulant?” Laurel asked as she took another large gulp of coffee. “And that chocolate is a stimulant, too?”

“I did actually, yes,” Felicity said quickly then gestured awkwardly. “Hey, are you okay?”

“I’m good. I am so freaking good right now it’s not even funny,” she breathed into her cup before taking another reverential sip. “At the Center they didn’t let us have anything that they classify as ‘stimulants’.” She looked at her pointedly, “No coffee, no chocolate, no soda, nothing. Absolutely no caffeine whatsoever.”

“Jesus,” Felicity said in muted horror.

“Exactly,” Laurel snorted. “Oh, and it gets worse.” She unwrapped another chocolate and popped it in her mouth, chewing as she spoke, “They’re into this whole holistic, organic mind/body thing so no sugar, no meat, no salt, no fat, no gluten—they fed us these grass and kelp smoothie things three times a day. Grass! Not ‘tastes like grass’: real grass!”
“Shit,” she said.

“Yeah,” Laurel said with a huff before taking another swallow of her coffee. “It was a fucking nightmare!” She stopped, “Oh, um, I say ‘fuck’ now. A lot actually. At the Center they encourage us to express our emotions verbally instead of holding them in. I hope that’s okay—I don’t want to offend you or anything.”

“No, no,” she said quickly. “Say ‘fuck’; it’s cool. If I had to live without caffeine and eat grass for three months I’d be saying ‘fuck’, too.”

“Anyway, they said it would help ‘detoxify’ our systems but all it did was give me the shits like you wouldn’t believe,” she told her. “I swear to fucking Christ the whole time I was there I was sitting on the goddamn toilet. Apparently that’s what detoxification means! Did you know that?”

“No, no I did not,” Felicity said cringing.

“Yeah,” Laurel said with a harsh chuckle as she popped another chocolate in her mouth. “You know how they say that you have like ten pounds of undigested food in your intestines all the time? Not anymore; they cleaned me out, boy!”

Felicity sat back in her seat, “Oh. That’s…that’s not good.”

“You know the weirdest part of all? As a part of the ‘detoxification process’, they offered coffee enemas,” she told her. “Coffee fucking enemas. I was like, ‘Why is it okay for you people to blow coffee up my ass and yet it’s not okay to drink it?’ Seriously, think about it!” She said, gesturing wildly. “First off, there was nothing left up in there to get out anyway, and secondly, why is it okay to stimulate my ass and nothing else?”

Nope, there was nothing she could say to counter that bit of logic. Nothing at all.

“Who, um, who picked this place? I mean, before you went there they must have had a pamphlet or…?”

“My mother,” Laurel said irritably. “Her new boyfriend, fucking ‘Gary’,” she said with a sneer, “recommended it. Apparently he teaches yoga there.” She looked at her flatly, “My mother is dating a twenty-six year old ‘hot yoga’ instructor who is into transcendental meditation and couples colonics. Do you know what that is?”

“Yeah, I think so,” she said breathing out a puff of air. Where the hell is Sara…?

“And by ‘hot yoga instructor’ I don’t mean he’s hot, I mean he does yoga in a room that’s like a hundred and four fucking degrees so, guess what?”

“What?” Felicity returned reluctantly.

She pointed to herself, “This neo-hippie shithead asshole tells my mother to send me to this fucked up hell hole where, not only do they feed you lawn clippings and shove coffee up your ass, but they make you do yoga in a fucking sauna!” She shook her head and downed the rest of her cup, “It was a fucking nightmare. I seriously thought about killing that guy. I had it all worked out, too. I was going to wait until he went into a **Standing Separate Leg Stretching Pose** and then I was just going to shove my entire foot up his kelp and grass fed vegan ass!”

“Ouch,” she hissed watching Laurel warily as she got up and went back to the pot to pour herself a third cup, draining the pot.
“Is it okay if I make another pot? I’m probably going to need a few more cups.”

“Are you sure?” Felicity asked in a higher than usual voice. “That’s a…a lot of caffeine. You might have trouble getting to sleep later.”

“You might have a point,” she said reluctantly as she looked down at the canister of coffee beans in her hand then shrugged. “Fuck it.” She poured the beans in the grinder and set up the pot again, “I’ll sleep when I’m dead.” As soon as she was done she sat back down and immediately popped another chocolate in her mouth. “Anyway,” she garbled around the candy in her mouth, “I hated it there but it wasn’t a total loss. I did learn a lot about myself and came to grips with a lot of repressed emotions. Mostly I learned how to relax and finally get in touch with my feelings.” She went to unwrap another truffle and looked down at the now empty bag, “Damn, I ate all your chocolate.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said quickly. “Now, getting back to what you were saying…?”

“Oh yeah,” she said popping the last truffle into her mouth and chewing slowly. “Anyway, it was just the worst experience of my life but, like I said, I did learn some stuff so there’s that, I guess.”

“No, I meant what you said about going back to the Foundry,” she told her. “To, you know, find me?”

“Oh yeah,” she said shaking her head. “Where was I?”

“You were at the part where you drove all night so you could find me and kick my ass,” she told her.

“I wasn’t going to kick your ass,” she reassured her quickly then paused. “No, that’s a lie; I was going to completely wreck you. Like *totally* slap the living shit out of you.”

Felicity cleared her throat nervously, “Okay, and are you still planning on…?”

“No,” she said waving her off and taking another sip of coffee. “I was completely in denial at that point and pissed off at the world. I wasn’t even mad at you really, I was mad at myself and you just happened to be the person I fixated on.” She looked at her, “Really; you’re okay. If I was going to try to kick your ass I already would have done it by now.”

“Well that’s…that’s good,” she shifted nervously in her seat and eyed her warily. This was definitely a bad day she was having. A very fucked up kind of bad day, “So what happened that changed your mind?”

“The letter,” she told her. “You never read it but when I wrote it I…well, I wrote a bunch of stuff about how sorry I was and how I respected you as a woman and as a person…”

“That’s nice,” Felicity said with a smile.

“It was total bullshit,” she told her. “I didn’t mean a word of it.”

“Okay,” she blinked.

“I mean, I do now,” she said quickly. “But in the headspace I was in then I completely hated you. I just wrote it because it was part of the twelve steps and I just wanted to get it over with. When I got to the Foundry you guys weren’t there and I just kind of lost it. I went into your workstation to look for a pad and pen so I could write you another letter to tell you how I really felt and I found the unopened envelope.”

“Oh,” Felicity said, her cheeks flushing again. “I’m so sorry, I--”
“Don’t be,” Laurel said firmly. “It was the wake-up call I needed.”

“What do you mean?” She asked in confusion.

Laurel sat back in her chair and grimaced, “My whole life I’ve been an overachiever. You look up ‘Type A personality’ in the encyclopedia and my picture is right next to it. I always had to be the most liked, the most popular, the best dressed, the prettiest, the smartest. I had the best grades, the cutest boyfriends; I always had to be perfect at everything. Sara was the screw up but I was the good daughter, you know?” She leaned her head back and stared up at the ceiling musingly. “Failure for me was never an option. I think that’s why I fell so hard for Ollie.” She lifted her head and smirked, “Yeah, it’s going to sound nuts but the reason I fell in love with him was because he was the first person I’d ever met who could screw up all the time and not give a shit. I mean, he coasted through school, showed up whenever, drank when he wanted to, partied constantly, he even peed on a cop—on a cop! I should have taken one look at this total douchebag and ran in the opposite direction but I didn’t. He was just so damned,” she seemed to struggle for a moment, “fearless, you know? Even when he was screwing up he just did it; just jumped right in with both feet and said ‘fuck the consequences’.” She smiled wanly, “I wanted to be able to do that but I couldn’t.”

“I guess I can understand that,” Felicity said quietly.

“Plus, he was hot,” she added.

“There’s that, too,” Felicity said wryly.

“Yeah, well, it was stupid; the whole thing,” she snorted. “Our relationship was completely toxic from the get-go. It wasn’t until I went to the Center and listened to all those other people talk about all the crap they’d been through, all the toxic relationships and enabling partners that I realized Ollie was my first drug and I was his. I was hooked on him just like pills or alcohol while Ollie needed me there in order to enable him so I could, I don’t know, help him believe that it was all okay. He needed someone to give him permission to sleep with anything that moved and because he knew I’d always take him back no matter what, that’s exactly what he did. Being with him got me high so I didn’t care that I was ruining my life as long as I got my fix of Ollie.” She offered her a humorless smile, “I mean, he fucked around on me constantly; hell, he fucked my *sister* and I still let him back in. What does that say about me?"

“That you loved him?” Felicity offered feebly.

“That wasn’t love,” she said dryly. “There’s a difference between love and addiction. I loved vodka too but that didn’t mean I wasn’t a drunk. I love opiates but that didn’t make me any less of an addict. I also loved Ollie but he was just as bad for me as the drugs and alcohol, if not worse.” She leaned forward, her voice falling to a confidential level, “He was so stoned and so reckless, half the time he’d wake up next to some girl and not even remember how he got there. He got Sandra pregnant while he was sleeping with me *and* Sara. It’s amazing that he came out of that without his dick rotting off. I was always very careful about making him wear a condom but shit happens; condoms break or you get caught up in the heat of the moment. When I look back on that now…I mean, what the hell was I thinking about? Who the hell would be crazy enough to have unprotected sex in this day and age? Especially with *Oliver Queen* of all people?”

Felicity bit her lip again and winced, “Ow.” She touched her lip noting the small smear of blood on her fingertip.

“You okay?” Laurel asked with a frown as she got up to retrieve a napkin.

“Uh yeah,” she said, dabbing at her lip. “Um, you were saying?”
“Anyway, I opened your drawer and there was the letter I wrote you. I snatched it up and I just—“ she grimaced. “I realized for the first time how out of control I had become. I mean, everyone on the team loved you and I hated you for that. Here I was, busting my ass, trying so hard to get people to see me and you were this awkward, sweet-faced, little nobody—no offence.”

“None taken,” she assured her.

“Who had everyone wrapped around your little finger,” she continued. “The guys all worshipped the ground you walked, my dad practically adopted you from the first moment he set eyes on you, Thea thought you were the best thing since sliced bread, and my sister, who couldn’t even stand to be in the same room with me, was practically living with you. And then there was Ollie—”

Felicity cringed and looked around furtively. Shit. “Um Laurel…” She raised her eyebrows and mouthed ‘BUGS’ but she wasn’t looking at her because she chose that moment to take another damn sip of coffee crack.

“I was absolutely convinced he was in love with you and that the two of you were sleeping with each other behind my back,” she snorted. “I mean, I know that’s crazy since you and Sara were together but—”

“What?” She yelped in surprise then cleared her throat, “I mean, what?” She asked in a more casual tone.

“I’ve known about you and Sara for a couple of years now,” Laurel told her with an understanding grin. “Besides, it was pretty obvious. I mean, she was living with you, you guys spent practically every minute together, plus you only had one bed and Sara was constantly complaining to dad about how you hogged the covers and snored like a buzz saw.”

“I do not!” Felicity said indignantly.

“Her exact words were, ‘How someone so tiny and sweet looking can snore like that is beyond me.”

“I have allergies,” she said sullenly. She closed her eyes and shook her head, “Wait, Laurel—!”

“Relax, I’ve known you were gay for a while. Ollie told me right after he introduced us for the first time you that you were a lesbian.”

Her jaw dropped in surprise, “He did?”

She nodded, “That didn’t make me any less jealous of you though because even if you weren’t interested in him he was definitely interested in you. Wait,” she pulled her phone out of her pocket. “I meant to tell you that I got a new phone and I lost your number. Do you mind?” She handed it to her.

“Uh, sure,” she said reaching for it, her head swimming in confusion. Oliver thought she was a lesbian? What? She looked down at the phone to enter her number and noticed that Laurel had it left open to a text from Oliver.

//Felicity/Sara investigating Orbital. Pretending to be a couple—play along. Will give you the details later. Be careful.//

She looked down in surprise then looked up at Laurel who gave her a wink and a slow grin.

Oh-kay. How the hell did Oliver…?
She deleted the message, exited out of the screen, and quickly entered her number before handing it back, “There you go,” she said weakly.

“Thanks,” she said putting it back in her pocket. “Anyway, I remembered Ollie telling me that you were the one person who never gave up on him no matter how badly he screwed up so when I saw that letter I realized that I had screwed things up so bad that everyone had completely given up on me. Ollie treated me like I was a stranger, Sara wouldn’t talk to me, my dad wouldn’t even look at me, Thea *hated* me. Worst of all, you; the woman who believed in someone like Ollie even after all the fucked up shit he’d done, couldn’t bring herself to even open my letter.” She smiled at her sadly, “You were my rock bottom, so thank you.”

“You’re welcome?” Felicity said faintly.

“I know you have no reason to trust me, I know I’ve said some pretty unforgivable things, but I’d really appreciate it if you’d give me one last chance,” she told her. “I don’t deserve it, I know, but I’m ready to start over and I think a big part of that is learning how to be strong and independent for the first time in my life.”

“You were always strong and independent,” Felicity told her with a frown.

“No I wasn’t,” Laurel said flatly. “I was a total doormat. I might have looked like I was strong but I wasn’t. Ollie was my crutch and then when he ‘died’, my job became my crutch, then when Tommy came around…” she swallowed, “I loved him, I did, and he loved me, but I didn’t love him enough. I was so used to Ollie shitting all over our relationship all the time that I just couldn’t bring myself to trust anyone anymore. It’s like I became Ollie and Tommy was me and I started doing the same thing to him that Ollie did when we were together. I ignored him, dismissed his feelings, treated him like crap; I even cheated on him with his best friend, a man he thought of as his brother, and he still gave his life to save me.” She swallowed and turned her head, wiping at her eyes with her hand. Felicity handed her one of the napkins Laurel had handed her earlier and she smiled faintly, “Thanks,” she said with a sniffle. “Anyway,” she said clearing her throat, “I didn’t deserve Tommy, he deserved someone better just like I deserved someone better than Oliver. The worst thing is that I knew that and I still kept falling into bed with him. Only this time it wasn’t me being the enabler, it was Oliver.”

She wiped her nose and got up to toss the used napkin in the trash, grabbing a box of tissues off the counter and bringing it back to the table. “I knew Oliver wasn’t really in love with me, not anymore. Every time he looked at me I could see the guilt in his eyes just eating away at him but I ignored it. I wanted him so it didn’t matter how he felt or how stupid I was being. I just, I let myself get pulled down into that bottomless pit and allowed it to happen.” She looked at her, “You know, when I was with CNRI these women would come in with bruises all over them, split lips, broken arms; their boyfriends or husbands had used them like punching bags, stole the rent money to get high, sold their food stamps for fifty cents on the dollar and their kids were hungry, and they’d come to us for help to try to negotiate with the landlord so they wouldn’t be kicked out into the streets. I’d ask them, ‘Do you want to file a restraining order?’ or ‘Do you want to divorce him?’ and, nine times out of ten, they’d say, ‘No! I love him!’” She made a rude noise, “It would drive me insane. I’d tell them that what they were doing was crazy and they’d just look at me and say, ‘You can’t help who you fall in love with.’” She rolled her eyes. “I always wanted to call bullshit on that. I mean, if a guy punches me in the face and steals the food out of my kid’s mouth I’m not going to think, ‘My Romeo!’.” She pulled a face, “But then again, there I was, going back to Ollie time and time again, knowing how toxic we were together; how is that any different than getting a punch in the head?”
Felicity’s eyebrows drew together in consternation, “I mean, I can understand what you’re saying but Oliver isn’t the same guy he was before the island.”

“Yeah, well, yes and no,” she told her. “Have you ever heard the old saying, ‘No one ever really leaves high school?’ Well, just because Ollie was no longer sleeping with everything that moved or smoking enough weed to fuel Rasta Fest it doesn’t mean he changed; he was still destructive, only instead of hurting other people by using them he was using other people to hurt himself.”

She wasn’t wrong.

“You made him better; I could see that and it drove me insane because I tried for years to fix him,” she looked away and grimaced. “I thought I was trying to fix him anyway. I thought if I loved him more, tried harder, kept pushing him, that he’d get better and love me back. Then here you are, you just come out of nowhere, and suddenly he’s changing for you when he wouldn’t do that for me after I’d spent years sacrificing my self-respect and any chance at my own happiness trying to do what you did just by walking in the room.” She turned to her again, her countenance wide-open and completely sincere, “I hated you for that but it wasn’t your fault, it was mine.” She leaned forward again, “You loved Ollie, but you never enabled him. You never pretended you were okay with how he treated people and you called him on his shit.” She gave her a crooked grin, “You could accomplish more with one dirty look than I could screaming at him until I was blue in the face. I was so, so jealous of you for that it wasn’t funny.”

“Laurel, while I appreciate what you’re saying, I’m no saint and I didn’t ‘change’ Oliver; he did that on his own,” she told him.

“He might have changed on his own but you were the one who lit the way for him,” she threw back. She took a moment as if to gather her thoughts, “Part of me worries that now that you’re here in Gotham, that Ollie is going to give up and go back to the way he was. If I were you, knowing how much he needed me, I’d hop a plane and go back in a heartbeat.”

“Laurel--!” She began.

“Let me finish,” she said, holding up her hand. “If I were you that’s what I’d do, but I’m not you. Then again, if I were you I’d stay and put up with all of his crap only to come full circle and wind up exactly where I am right now. You figured out something it has taken me years to, which is that the best thing you can do for yourself and for Ollie is to let him deal with his own crap for a change. Let him do his own thing, let him succeed or fail on his own and deal with the consequences. Meanwhile, you live your life instead of constantly putting aside your needs in order to take care of his.” She smiled again, “I’ve been in love with him since I was sixteen years old and I’m just now getting that. Now, don’t get me wrong; Oliver isn’t a bad guy and everything that’s wrong with my life is something I did to myself. No one made me into this; I’m responsible for every damn thing that’s happened to me including the crap Ollie put me through. Still, you broke the cycle and, whether you realize it or not, that makes you a goddamn hero in my book.”

Felicity felt a hot flush of guilt crash over her and felt her chest begin to constrict. Laurel thought she was this strong, confident woman who had escaped falling into the same traps she had, but was she right?

No.

No, she was wrong. She had loved Oliver for years, watched women walk in and out of his life and bed while she stayed clinging to the hope that someday he’d finally notice her, that someday she’d be the ‘person he could really care about’, only to find out that she wasn’t even the person he was thinking of when he said that to her. Even after that she fell into bed with him knowing exactly how
that was going to end, only to be dumped the next morning. Then she did the same thing all over again only with Bruce. Yeah, Bruce loved her and made a commitment but how different were they really?

Was she Laurel? Or was she worse because while Laurel seemed to be on the path to healing she was still making the same mistakes over and over again?

No, she told herself. It wasn’t the same thing; she loved Bruce and she wasn’t just going along with whatever he told her to. Just today she stood up to him and backed him down, that proved she wasn’t some kind of emotional punching bag, right?

‘And what if Bruce asked you to quit?’ came the voice from the shadows. ‘Would you give this up just because he wanted you too?’

No, of course not.

‘Are you sure?’

…yeah. Yes, absolutely.

Even as she said it she could feel the niggling pull of doubt deep within the recesses of her mind. If Bruce put his foot down and demanded she give all this up or else, chances are she’d cave. He’d wear her down and she’d cave just like she’d always done. Oh, she’d put up a fight but eventually he’d make just the right argument and she’d fold.

Her heart squeezed in her chest again.

It wasn’t a good feeling.

“You okay?” Laurel asked with a frown. “You look a little pale.”

Her lips twitched upwards in a rough semblance of a smile, “It’s just been kind of a long day, that’s all.”

No, she was just tired, that’s all. She wasn’t Laurel and Bruce wasn’t Oliver…

…right?

“Listen, if you want me to leave, I will,” she told her. “I can totally understand it if you don’t trust me or want to work with me. I mean, I get it; I do. Still, I really want to do this with you if you’ll let me.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” She asked her, silently trying to communicate to her just how tenuous this situation was with her eyes as she looked pointedly down to her cellphone and then back to her.

“I’m sure; I can handle it,” she promised.

It was risky; Laurel was unstable, fresh off a stint in rehab…

She looked at her again and the woman’s jaw tightened determinately as she nodded in understanding.

Some day she was really going to have to learn to listen to that little voice in the back of her head when it told her something was a bad idea.

“Do you have a place to stay?” Felicity asked hesitantly.
“Isabel put me up at one of the corporate apartments until I can find a place,” she said with a relieved smile.

Don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it…

Oh shut up.

“Hang on,” she said resignedly. She got up and went over to her desk and dialed her sister.

“Oh my God! Bruce is a complete asshole, you know that?” Her sister immediately burst out. “He just came barging in here today like he owned the damn place—well, I know he owns it, but still. He--!”

“Tam!” Felicity nearly shouted, “I’m at work and I can’t discuss this right now. You can tell me about your asshole of a boss later, okay?”

“My…ooh. Oh yeah, sure,” she said roundly.

Good God, you’d think a woman who worked in the movie business would be a better actor, Felicity thought wearily.

“For the record though, my *boss* is a total asshat and you would have to be insane to marry a man like that—not that anyone is getting married, I’m just saying that if they were going to get married to him then--!”

“Tam!” Felicity said, cutting her off, “I’m late for a meeting. All I want to know is if any of the furniture is ready to be delivered yet?”

“Well, Zander and I are at the warehouse now; why?”

“A friend of mine is here from out of town and they need a place to crash; is there any way you can get Zander to have them deliver some bedroom furniture and have it set up by tonight?”

“A friend, huh?” Tam said archly. “Sure, of course; throw enough money at them and you can get pretty much anything done on short notice. Unless you have some objections to me spending a butt-load of cash?”

“Go wild, Tam; just get it done,” she said in a disgruntled tone.

“Really?” She said cheerfully. “Because you said…”

“I know what I said,” she told her. “Just do whatever you have to do, okay?”

“Hang on,” she heard the muffled sounds of her sister talking to someone she assumed was the decorator. “Zander said we can get that done but that they haven’t started painting yet so…?”

“We’re probably not going to be there during the day anyway. Just have him leave the windows or something open to air it out and we’ll live in the mess.”

There was some more murmuring on the other end of the line, “Zander said to ask if you just wanted the one room or the whole thing done ASAP because we can get it done in a week or two but that means paying the laborers triple-time.”

Fuck it, “Like I said, do what you’ve got to do, just set up the guest room tonight, at least.”

Tam made a high pitched squeal of joy on the other end of the line that made Felicity have to jerk the
receiver from her ear or risk a perforated ear drum. “You won’t regret this!”

“I already do,” she muttered. “When you set up the bedroom furniture in the guest room, don’t forget to pick up some linens and toiletries, okay?”

“Sure thing!” Tam said merrily. “Bye!”

“Bye,” she said, hanging up.

She had a sinking feeling that Bruce was going to take one look at the bill her sister was about to rack up in furniture and decorating fees and realize he could no longer call himself a billionaire.

“That was my sister,” she said to Laurel. “I’m having my apartment redecorated and she agreed to handle it for me. It’s kind of a mess right now but if you need someplace to stay for a while…?”

“Yeah, I’d love to; thanks,” Laurel said with a beaming grin. “Seriously.”

“It’s no problem,” she said shaking her head. Besides with everything that was going on with HIVE and the weirdness Wildcat mentioned, the last thing she wanted to do was leave Laurel in one of Orbital’s apartments. Chances are they were bugged just like the office and one wrong word could ruin everything. At least Bruce’s place was secure and she could keep a close eye on her just in case she fell off the wagon or started spiraling again.

“No really, to tell you the truth I wasn’t really looking forward to staying by myself so soon after leaving rehab,” she said in a more muted tone. “Thanks.”

She offered her a crooked smile in return, “Yeah, well, you haven’t seen the apartment yet so you might change your mind. Tam, that’s my sister, is having some bedroom furniture delivered for you since the place is pretty much empty right now. After we get out of here I’ll call Tam to let you in and you guys can hang out.”

“If you have to work late I can stay,” she said quickly.

“No, that’s not it,” she felt her face flush red. “Um, I’m kind of going to dinner tonight with Isabel so I might be pretty late.”

“You’re…dating Isabel now?” Laurel asked in surprise.

“Sort of,” she said faintly.

“Does, um, *Sara* know?” She asked pointedly in a way that told her she wasn’t actually taking about Sara.

“Yeah, she knows,” Felicity nodded.

“Okay,” Laurel shrugged. “Should we go to the meeting?”

“Yeah, why not?” Felicity said heaving another sigh as they walked out together.

As they walked towards her team, Isabel looked up and shot her a look of predatory appreciation.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, she thought wearily.

God, I really do need a friggin’ cookie.

Fuck.
Chapter Forty-Six


“Laurel,” Queen answered without looking up from his phone. “Maybe I can catch her before she gets to Orbital so she doesn’t accidentally blow Sara and Felicity’s cover.”

“Can you trust her?” Bruce doubtfully. “Her file said she was a recovering addict who only recently got out of a rehab facility.”

Queen’s lips tightened in an expression of consternation, “Honestly? I don’t know but I’d like to believe she wouldn’t deliberately hurt her sister and if she blows Felicity’s cover she’ll take Sara down as well.”

“That’s a pretty big gamble; risking my sister’s life on a drug addict’s ability to remain rational,” Luke said taciturnly.

“Laurel’s clean,” he told him. “Her father has been keeping us in the loop on her progress and she’s spent the last three months in a specialized treatment facility to not just treat her addiction issues but to help her deal with her underlying bipolar disorder. Other than some initial resistance to the treatment, she’s worked hard to get her life back in order. Plus, she’s an operator herself. I helped train her along with her sister; she can handle herself in the field and she knows the safety of her team comes first, no matter what other personal issues she may have.”

“And you’re sure about that; you’ve spoken to her, visited her in this treatment center?” Bruce asked, already knowing the answer.

Queen’s jaw clenched, “No.”

“Then how do you know?” Luke asked, worry creeping into his expression. “She could get them killed!”

“I know Laurel,” Queen told him. “The only reason I didn’t visit her in the facility was because she asked that I not come, not that it’s any of your business,” he said, his eyes staring daggers at Bruce. “Besides, the only other option is to let her go in blind which would only serve to place them in further jeopardy. No, Isabel recruited Laurel for a reason; several actually.”

Luke’s expression tightened, “Which are?”

“To draw him in for one,” Bruce answered for him, his eyes still fixed on Queen. “On the off-chance you haven’t already connected the dots with Sara and Felicity’s recruitment, Laurel joining Orbital would definitely raise a red flag.”

“That and she’s testing them,” Queen said with a nod. “Laurel caused a few rather public scenes before receiving treatment. She became aggressive and confrontational when she was spiraling and we already know that Isabel had them watched. It wouldn’t surprise me if she had eyes on Laurel as well and knew that Laurel and her sister had been at odds before Sara left town. Isabel enjoys chaos, she employs it as a psychological tactic. Introducing Laurel into the picture will throw them off so she can manipulate them into revealing their true intentions. Laurel is merely a tool; it’s Felicity’s and Sara’s reactions we should be worrying about.”


He sighed and leaned forward, his brow furrowing in thought. He rested his elbows on his knees then spoke, “Sara, when she’s acting as Canary, is as frosty as they come. She’s pure tactics and
logic, but when it comes to her family she loses that and the lines get blurred. Whether Isabel bought their little byplay this morning or not, it doesn’t matter; she’ll use whatever emotional pressure points she has at her disposal to break her. Bringing in her sister will throw Sara off-balance and leave them more vulnerable to her attacks.”


“As I said, Laurel was acting erratically before she went into treatment,” Queen said grimly. “She had a tendency to take her anger out on Felicity. Just before she went into rehab, she confronted her at my club. Felicity froze up and when she didn’t respond to her taunts, Laurel attempted to escalate the confrontation; she would have hit her if I hadn’t stepped in.”

“This woman tried to attack Felicity physically and you expect us to trust her?” Bruce demanded.

“We don’t exactly have a choice in the matter, now do we?” The other man shot back. “She’s going in whether we want her to or not, and Isabel will use her instability as well as Sara and Felicity’s heightened emotional responses to her to her advantage.”

Bruce felt a surge of anger flood through him and had to again resist the urge to break Queen in half. All of this was his fault; every bit of it. It was Queen who allowed that viper, Isabel Rochev, into Felicity’s life in the first place, “Funny how you seem to suddenly know so much about Isabel Rochev and her ‘tactics’.”

“Meaning what?” He bit out in response.

“Meaning that you allowed this woman to infiltrate your life in the first place. You brought her into Felicity’s life and allowed her to run this operation right under your nose,” Bruce told him. “That tells me you’re either incompetent, sloppy, or both. How you’ve managed to stay alive much less retain control over your company for this long is beyond me.”

Queen’s face darkened and his mouth opened to rebut his statement but he was cut off by Alfred before he could say anything.

“We’re here, sir,” he said from the front of the car. Alfred parked the car near the private elevator to the penthouse and all three men exited the vehicle quickly. The older man rolled down the window, “Sir, do you want me to collect your bags from the manor and meet you here in an hour?”

“There’s no need to go to the manor; I should have something suitable upstairs,” he told him. “I’m only planning on being gone overnight and then I’m coming straight back.” He emphasized his timeline for Queen’s benefit.

“Very good, sir,” Alfred said, turning off the motor and exiting the car to join them in the elevator.

As soon as the elevator stopped, Bruce immediately exited and opened the door to the penthouse, “Felicity?” He called out even though he already knew it was a longshot. When no one answered he cursed under his breath and went into their bedroom.

His eyes first went to the bed that had been freshly made which meant either she had taken the time to straighten it or the maids had been in. Since the suit she’d been wearing was still tossed over the chair where she’d left it along with her shoes he guessed that probably wasn’t the case however. He strode into the bathroom but she wasn’t there either and a glance into the hamper revealed the clothes she’d gone to bed in. When he exited the room he saw that both Queen and Luke had followed him in while Alfred had presumably gone into the closet to pack.

He noticed the shadowed expression on Queen’s face as he looked around the room picking out the
little pieces of Felicity that had already made their home there; her clothes, her spare glasses and
tablet that sat on the nightstand next to his, the new jewelry box on the chest of drawers that was still
opened, the scent of her perfume that hung in the air. It was obvious they shared this room and he felt
a small curl of satisfaction in his chest as the realization of that became apparent in the other man’s
face.

“She must already be at Orbital then,” Queen said tightly.

“Apparently,” Bruce said.

Alfred came out of the closet carrying a few garment bags and an overnight bag. “I noticed several
garment racks in the foyer; if you would like, sir, I can go ahead and put those away for Miss Felicity
while you and your guests retire to the alternate Batcave.”

“No need.” Queen said, his voice hard and his eyes meeting Bruce’s in an obvious challenge, “After
all, she’ll need to pack everything anyway when she moves out.”

Something dark and possessive came over Bruce and he gave into it. “He’s right, Felicity and I
decided yesterday that she’ll be moving into the manor before the wedding so it would be easier to
just leave them for now and send someone to come fetch them and the rest of her belongings later.”
He turned to Alfred, “I’d like that done as soon as possible, in fact. We want the place completely
cleared out before the renovation.”

The look on Queen’s face nearly caused the corners of his lips to turn up into a smile of triumphant
satisfaction.

“Very good, sir,” Alfred said as he laid the luggage on the bed.

“Since when?” Luke demanded as they exited the room to head for the study.

“Since when what?” Bruce asked him as he opened the clock and accessed the palm scanner.

“Since when is Baby moving into the manor?” He turned to look at the younger man whose
expression was just as irate as Queen’s.

“Married people live together, Luke,” he told him flatly. “And, make no mistake, your sister and I are
getting married. Sooner rather than later.”

“Maybe,” Luke muttered as he and Queen both joined him in the elevator.

“No maybe about it,” he told him. “We’re getting married in six weeks; in fact, if Baby would agree
to it, we’d be getting married even sooner than that but she wanted to give your father time to adjust
to the idea first.”

“And speaking of our dad, it’s funny that you seem to have made all these plans as far as Baby’s
concerned and yet he doesn’t even know you’re involved yet!” He said angrily.

“Which I will remedy as soon as I have a chance,” Bruce assured him coolly. “In fact, I was in the
middle of discussing that with Lucius before my morning went all to hell thanks to all of this Orbital
business.”

“Six weeks, huh?” Queen asked indolently as he leaned against the back of the elevator car. “Is there
some reason you’re rushing things, Wayne? Afraid Felicity might change her mind?”

He turned to look into the infuriated countenances of both men, “Not at all,” he said smoothly. “It’s
just that Felicity and I intend to start our family sooner rather than later and neither of us see the need to wait any longer than necessary.”

Luke froze, “Felicity’s pregnant?”

A muscle began to tic in Queen’s jaw as his fists clenched at his sides.

The doors opened and Bruce stepped out, allowing a few critical seconds to pass before he answered the question, “Not yet but we’ve agreed to start trying in earnest within the next year or so. Of course, if it happens sooner than that I’d have no objections and neither would she,” He turned to Luke as he stepped up to the Watchtower terminal. “I’m in love with your sister, Luke, and I intend to marry her. The sooner you get used to the idea, the better off you’ll be.” And that goes for Queen as well, he thought as the other man’s sharp gaze followed him with deadly intent.

Cold anger suffused Luke’s face, “So what? You marry her, get her pregnant, then what? Are you going to keep being the Bat and make her a widow or, worse yet, a target? What about that, huh?”

“I’m retiring the cowl,” he told him.


“Bullshit,” Queen said harshly.

“I’ve already talked to Dick and he’s agreed to take over. As soon as this Orbital business is settled, I’m taking a less active role in the team so Felicity and I can concentrate on starting a family and taking the mission globally.”

“Globally?” Luke asked, his attention shifting.

“It’s something I’ve been planning for a while,” he told him as he sat down at the console and pulled up the last files accessed by Felicity. “A sort of Batman Incorporated based on your mission in the DRC. I want to run it through a separate foundation to cover the costs of the missions and recruit vigilantes all over the globe.”

“That sounds suspiciously similar to the organization Felicity is investigating,” Queen pointed out.

“I was working on this on and off long before I became aware of Orbital’s existence but, even so, it’s a good idea. Now that I won’t have to focus all my attention here in Gotham I can finally take it out of the planning stages.”

Felicity had apparently found time to work on Watchtower and integrated at least some of her LAIR programming into the system because it automatically took him into the backdoor she created when she hacked into the Daily Planet’s servers. Unfortunately it didn’t tell him any more than what little he’d already learned from Barbara.

“And what exactly will Felicity’s role be in this ‘Batman Incorporated’ concept?” Queen asked a bit snidely.

“Anything she wants it to be,” Bruce told him in a hard tone as he turned to look at him. “I’ve made it clear that as my wife and partner,” he said, emphasizing the former, “she can take as active a role in the mission as she likes.”

“And if she doesn’t want to join your mission?” Queen asked him. “What then?”

“Then she can take up a position within my company, or in the Foundation, or even stay home for
that matter, so she can be with our children full time,” he told them. “I imagine Felicity might want to take some time off for that anyway, but what she does is entirely up to her.”

“Don’t bother trying to spin bullshit into gold for me, Wayne,” Queen said angrily. “You might have Felicity convinced that you’re prepared to give up the mission for home and hearth but you can’t fool me. If you really cared about her then you’d let her go and never bother her again because you and I both know you aren’t giving up shit.”

“You don’t know a goddamn thing about me or how I feel about Felicity, Queen; nor do I feel the need to justify our decision to get married and create a life together to you or anyone else,” Bruce said in a dangerous growl. “She’s my fiancée, not yours, and our relationship is none of your damn business.”

“Maybe, maybe not, but I do know that if you’re desperate enough to concoct this bullshit story about how you’re giving up the mission just to keep her by your side, then you’ll just wind up destroying her.”

“And what makes you think she’ll agree to return with you to Starling?” Bruce demanded. “What can you possibly offer her that I can’t?”

“The truth, for one,” he said coldly.

“And what truth is that?” he riposted. He turned in the chair and gestured towards him carelessly, his eyes seeking out Luke, “Your friend Queen here, the man you seem to think is a far more suitable companion for your sister than I am; he got her shot, offered her up as bait on more than one occasion, and finally forced her in a situation in which she had to shoot and kill at least one man then strap a bomb to herself. You want to know how he thanked her for all that?” He asked, raking his eyes over the other man and making sure he found him lacking, “He kicked her off his team but not until after he slept with her. He used her, time and time again! He doesn’t care about your sister; he certainly won’t be making any sort of commitment towards her,” he said, eyeing him with undisguised contempt. “He’s a selfish son of a bitch who only cares about himself and, sooner or later, he’s going to get her killed!”

“And what about you, Wayne? Like your ‘intentions’ when it comes to Felicity have always been above reproach? Like you’ve never used her?” Queen shot back. “Yeah, she told me all about how you seduced her when she was barely nineteen years old then ended it by telling her she was just another lay before leaving some cash on the dresser. At least when I sent her away it was to protect her, not because I was just looking for something convenient to stick my dick in and didn’t want to deal with the fallout afterwards!”

Bruce turned his hard gaze back to Queen, feeling his insides boil as he seethed with barely contained rage, “So what are your ‘intentions’ towards Felicity? Are you going to declare your feelings for her only to take it back as soon as some other woman catches your eye? Offer her a life of loneliness and heartache instead of a home and a family while you choose one woman after the other over her? String her along, always putting your mission before her safety and well-being?” He snorted in disgust, “I may not be a good man, Queen; I may not even be good enough for Felicity but, unlike you, I’m willing to do what it takes to be what she needs me to be.” The corners of his lips curled upwards in a mocking smile, “Or maybe I’m wrong. Maybe you care about her after all. You’re good at showing that sort of thing, right? Helena Bertinelli, Sara Lance, Laurel Lance, Sandra Hawke…your particular brand of ‘loving care’ did wonders for all of them, didn’t it?”

Queen lunged for him, his face a mask of rage and Bruce immediately sprang up and blocked his punch before countering with one of his own. The two men immediately went into full out battle mode; each throwing devastating punches before blocking and countering them with their own. Both
men were tired, neither had slept, both wrung out from worry and stress, but rage and anger fueled them and with every landed punch, every slap of flesh against flesh, that need to establish dominance grew.

Bruce barely felt the punches to his ribs, or jaw; he paid no mind to it as the taste of blood flooded his mouth, all he cared about was hurting the man in front of him. This man had nearly gotten the woman he loved killed. He put a gun in the hands of the one pure thing he had ever known; the only thing pure thing he’d ever believed in. He brought her so low that she would have killed herself to save him believing that his life was more important than hers; that all of their lives were more important than hers.

That no one needed her.

That’s what Lance told Tim; she said that they loved her but no one *needed* her.

He did that to her.

*He* did that to her. *He* made her believe that. *He* made her believe….

…he made her believe that she wasn’t wanted and that no one needed her.

A sudden realization stole over Bruce and it was so powerful, so devastating, that he faltered and Queen’s punch hit home sending him sprawling on the ground.

…he did that to her. He, not Queen, did that to her. He brought her in, he seduced her, he cast her away. For four years he kept his distance and allowed Queen the opportunity to infect her with his darkness. He spent the last several weeks trying to undo the damage he’d caused, trying to turn her back into the woman he had known, but she wasn’t that girl anymore.

She’d been trying to tell him for weeks but he refused to listen. She wasn’t ‘Baby’ anymore; she wasn’t even Felicity. She wasn’t the little girl with the glittery fingernails and the pink tutu who drew him pictures that he’d dutifully hang on his office wall. She wasn’t the naive young woman he’d laid down on a steel gurney and made love to while stinking of sweat and blood. She wasn’t the woman he’d spent the last four years dreaming about on the rare occasions that he allowed such thoughts to invade his mind. But whoever this new woman was, she was still his; she had always been his. He created her, he was responsible for whatever devils plagued her, and if it took the rest of his life he’d make it right.

He leapt to his feet and rushed the other man, bulldozing into him and lifting him off his feet with a roar as he slammed him into one of the cement pillars within the cavernous subway tunnel, the hatred he felt for himself transferring to this man; this echo of his past. Finally he could see it; he was no longer battling Oliver Queen but the man he once was. The person he was fighting was the man who had taken the innocence of the only woman he had ever allowed past his carefully constructed shields. With every punch he threw, every pain filled grunt, he was punishing himself.

Queen brought his elbows down hard across his back causing Bruce to reflexively loosen his hold. Queen twisted in his grip and slammed his fist into his jaw sending him flying into one of the heavy wooden crates of supplies that Felicity had ordered. Bruce grabbed one of the wooden slats, wielding it like a club, and slammed it into Queen’s stomach causing the other man to expel the air from his lungs. Balling his fist, Queen struck out and caught Bruce in the face. He heard a crack as pain ripped through him and he knew he had fractured his cheekbone but still he kept fighting.

“That’s enough!”
The shout cracked like a whip across the space and both men froze, their eyes seeking the source. Alfred, the elderly gentleman who rarely spoke above a polite hush, was standing between them, his features set in stone. “Enough,” he repeated in a voice that was, although at a more temperate level, somehow even more intimidating as it carried with it a note of stern disappointment that seemed to strike at the hearts of both men.

“Alfred--” Bruce began.

“No,” the elderly man said quietly, his steely gaze boring into him. “Both of you, upstairs now!”

“Look--” Queen said, relaxing his stance to turn to the older man.

“Now,” Alfred told him in a stern tone that brought back memories of his eight year old self tracking mud through the kitchens. “Or I tell Miss Felicity about this.”

Queen flinched and Bruce felt his lips tug upwards into a triumphant smile until the old butler fixed his icy gaze upon him as well, “Along with Mr. Fox and Mrs. Hu.”

Bruce felt the smile drop from his face instantly.

“Go upstairs, clean yourselves up, and wait for me in the kitchen,” Alfred told both men in a tone that would brook no arguments. “You will not speak to each other nor shall there be any further physical confrontations; am I clear?”

“Yes sir,” Queen said raising his eyebrows in a gesture of bemusement.

“Master Bruce?” His guardian asked coolly.

“Fine,” he ground out, his jaw clenched.

“Master Luke; if you will please remain down here and monitor Watchtower?” Alfred told him.

“Sure, um, yes sir,” he said, clearing his throat and moving to sit at the workstation.

“Thank you; also, if you would be so kind, please make sure to arrange a place for Mr. Queen to spend the night. I’m sure Ms. Wells can see to it one of the corporate apartments is made available but, barring that, I will have the staff prepare him a room in the manor.”

“There is no way in hell--!” Bruce started.

Again Alfred fixed him with a cold eye and Bruce found himself biting back an angry response.


“Excellent,” he told him before gesturing toward the lift. “Gentlemen; after you.”

Both men exchanged a look before reluctantly entering the elevator together followed closely by Alfred.

“Somebody’s in trouble,” Queen muttered under his breath.

“Shove it up your ass, Queen,” Bruce shot back as he rubbed his cheek that had rapidly begun to swell.
“Enough,” the old man told them as he hit the button to carry them back upstairs. As soon as the doors closed he turned to them, the polite persona of the gentlemen butler disappearing and in his place stood the master of spy craft, soldier, and former MI-5 operative. “I do not know, nor do I care, what insanity has possessed the two of you that would cause you both to behave like children fighting over a toy while Miss Felicity’s life is in jeopardy, but it ends now.” Both men opened their mouths to speak but the elderly gentleman silenced them with merely a look. “It ends now,” he repeated grimly.

Bruce nodded once followed by Queen.

“Very good. With that said, we will retire to the kitchen where I shall do my best to repair the damage you two have done to one another after you clean yourselves up, and then I shall drop you off at the airport to meet Mr. Fox,” he said giving Bruce another disparaging look, “And you, Mr. Queen, will join Master Dick in his surveillance of the Orbital Organization,” he said, turning his stern gaze to Queen. “I’m sure he would be grateful for your assistance. In the meantime, both of you will discontinue these ridiculous hostilities and behave as professionals, not like a pair of hooligans engaged in a schoolyard brawl. I assume you both find these terms acceptable?” Both men nodded again silently. “Very well then.”

The doors opened to the study and Queen cleared his throat. “I, um, in my bag I have some herbs that may help bring down the swelling and speed the healing process along.”

Alfred turned a keen eye towards him, “That would be most appreciated. I’ll call downstairs and have Master Luke bring your bags up forthwith.”

“No need,” Bruce said gruffly as he continued to rub at his rapidly swelling eye and jaw. At Alfred’s disapproving glare he added quickly, “Felicity already has some in the kitchen next to the stove.”

“Excellent,” Alfred said bringing out his cell phone. “Even so, I’m certain Mr. Queen, that you would prefer to change into your own clothing.”

“Thanks, yeah,” Oliver said, looking down at his bloody and torn sweater with a grimace.

“If you gentlemen will please go clean yourselves up. Mr. Queen, feel free to use one of the guest baths; I’ll be in shortly with your bags and then we can all retire to the kitchen where you can prepare these herbs you spoke of.”

Both men exchanged another dark look before parting ways under the intense scrutiny of the elder man; each of them wearing identical expressions of pained chastisement.

This is how far I’ve fallen, Bruce thought as he stomped towards the master bath, tossing his ruined clothes into the hamper. Here he was; forty-one years old, a successful businessman, a man feared by many, and he was being given a time-out by his butler.

“Goddamn it,” he muttered as he stepped under the hot spray of the shower. He only hoped Felicity had taken all the cameras he set up throughout the cave and the penthouse off-line. If not he was never going to live this down.

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“Sorry,” Ms. Wells told him. “Had I known Mr. Queen and his party were coming I would have had my assistant reserve them a room. I can call around but a better bet would be to see if Bruce would be willing to put them up at his place; he’s got tons of room.”
“Okay, thanks,” Luke told her before ending the call. His lips thinned in consternation before an idea struck him.

“Bruce is a total dick, you know that?” Tam said as soon as she picked up.

“Yeah, so what else is new?” Luke asked her with a sigh. “Listen, Oliver Queen is in town and he needs a place to stay.”

“So why are you calling me?” She asked him.

“I don’t know?” Luke said with a huff. “I called Ms. Wells and she said that all the corporate apartments had already been booked. I was hoping you knew of someplace he could stay.”

“Wait; where are you?”

“The penthouse.”

“Dad’s penthouse?”

“No, Bruce’s penthouse,” he told her.

“You mean Felicity’s and my penthouse,” she corrected him.

“Whatever Tam; look, Bruce is going out of town and I need a place to stick this guy,” he told her impatiently. “If I can’t find him a hotel or something he’s going to have to stay at the manor at that’s really not a good idea right now.”

“Why not? And why is he here anyway?” She asked.

“He came here with me to help with this Orbital situation and, as soon as he and Bruce got in a room together, they nearly killed each other.” He told her, “Not that I really care if they tear each other apart or not, but right now we need all the help we can get to help with Baby and whatever it is she’s gotten herself involved with. Can you help me or what, because if he winds up staying with Bruce it won’t end well. Plus, Bruce is on his way out of town to deal with this thing going on in Metropolis.”

“What’s going on in Metropolis?” Tam asked.


“Hey wait, Baby’s on the other line; let me call you right back!”

“Wait, Tam! Tell Felicity—!” He glared down at his phone. “Damn it! She hung up on me. Fucking figures,” he grumbled. His phone rang again and he picked up without even bothering to check the ID, “Tam?”

“No, Master Luke, it’s not.”

“Oh, hi Alfred,” Luke said bad-temperedly then winced. “Sorry, I was just expecting a call back from my sister.”

“It’s quite alright,” the older man assured him. “If you would, could you go to the car and fetch Mr. Queen’s luggage and bring it upstairs for me, please? There should be a spare set of keys in the drawer of the workstation.”

“Thank you.”

“You know, no one ever says ‘goodbye’ anymore; they just hang up the damn phone,” he grumbled as he made his way to the elevator. A few minutes later he had Queen’s bag in hand and was walking back to the elevator when his phone rang again. He glanced down and immediately picked up, “What’s going on with Felicity? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine,” Tam told him. “Oh, and don’t worry about Oliver; she told me to set up the guestroom at the penthouse for him.”


“That’s what she said,” Tam told him.

“How did she know he was even here?”

“I don’t know how she knew, she just did.”

Luke frowned, “You didn’t tell her though, right? You know that call was probably bugged.”

“Oh please, like I’m new or something? Of course I knew that!” Tam said with a snort. “I’m with Zander at the warehouse now picking out some furniture; she said she wanted me to set him up in the guest room. It’s just Oliver right?”

“Oh….?” Luke frowned, “I don’t know. I think we might wind up with a full house by the time the rest of the team from Starling gets here.”

“How many people are we talking about?” Tam asked, sounding rather put out.

“Four, maybe five more besides Queen, and then there’s Tim and Barb but they already have their own places.”

“So, in other words, you need me to buy all of the furniture for the entire penthouse tonight,” she said flatly. “Like all of it. You want me to decorate the entire penthouse in one afternoon.”

“No,” he told her. “Just the bedroom stuff and maybe a couch or two and then the kitchen…” he paused, “Basically yeah, the whole thing. I don’t know, Tam! I don’t do this decorating shit! I live in a hut in the middle of the Congo!”

“You are helping me get all this stuff done, you hear me,” she said in a dangerous undercurrent. “We’ll get some moving guys and ask the security guards to help but there is no way in hell Zander and I are doing this all by ourselves! Plus I still have to buy all kinds of bedding and stuff which means you need to pitch in and go down to Killinger’s and pick everything up!”

“I’m supposed to be manning Watchtower,” he told her.

“Screw Watchtower!” She told him then turned to someone else, “Sorry, it’s my brother; he keeps trying to convince me to become a Jehovah’s Witness.” Her voice dropped to a more confidential level, “Zander and I already have everything picked out. I just need to call down there and you can pick it all up then you need to wait for us at the penthouse, okay?”

“You know, I’m not your errand boy, Tam. I have to suit up so I can do my real job which is to save lives,” he grumbled.

“Oh shut up about the stupid ‘Batman of Africa’ thing,” she said in a harsh whisper. “You’re the
only one who cares about it anyway; no one else has ever even heard of ‘Batwing’ before.”

He hit the up button on the private elevator angrily, “For your information, plenty of people have heard of--!”

“Right,” she said, cutting him off. “Look, save it for the lion centaurs, Bat-boy; I’m busy. Talk to you later.”

“Goddamn it,” Luke said, glaring down at his phone. “I can’t wait to get back to Africa. At least there I can get some respect.”

Felicity walked up to her team for the first time with Laurel trailing close behind as Isabel immediately began going over the mission details. Having already heard the specifics she allowed her mind to wander a bit as she looked around at the newcomers. Lyla immediately noticed her and gave her a wink which she returned with a smile and a slight nod of her own. Huntress was still hanging back from the group, pretending to be bored as she leaned against the wall in the corner but her eyes were alert as she kept up with everything going on around her. Katana was completely on point, her training and discipline immediately recognizable in her stance and attention to detail as she asked questions regarding mission specifics. Sara had adopted a similar stance to Katana’s, both of them showing a level of professionalism and intensity that Felicity had learned to respect and strive for. Then there was Gypsy…

From the minute she and Laurel had joined the group the woman had seemed disturbed by something. No, not disturbed, Felicity corrected mentally; more like spooked. Her eyes kept wandering over to her but as soon as Felicity caught her gaze her attention would quickly focus back on Isabel even though it was obvious she wasn’t paying attention. Whatever her problem was it had something to do with her and not Laurel. She’d barely glanced at the other woman when she walked in the room; no, it was definitely Felicity she was fixating on.

Again the other woman glanced at her then quickly looked away. Felicity fell back next to Laurel, “Hey,” she whispered. “Do I have anything on my face?”

“What?” She frowned.

“Blood or anything?”

Laurel ran her eyes over her, “No, actually your lip doesn’t look all that bad really and the bruises aren’t too noticeable under your makeup ; why?”

“Nothing,” she said, with a grimace. “Never mind.” She focused her attention back on the meeting.

Sara looked at the sat images up on the monitor carefully, “So what does your intel have on this safe house? Are Creote and Durlin alone or are we facing an army of mercs when we get there?”

“Did you see that guy? He *is* an army,” Lyla muttered.

“It’s just the two of them as far as we can tell,” Isabel told them, flipping to another image. “Infra-red shows only two heat signatures. The problem you’re facing, if you do manage to get past Creote’s defenses, is that both ARGUS and the League are after them as well and if we have this information you can be sure that they’re close behind. You need to get in and out as quickly and cleanly as possible.”

“Durlin is an information broker, correct? Why does the League want him so badly?” Katana asked.
“He’s not just an information broker; he’s *the* information broker,” Lyla said answering for her. “Waller has been after him for years,” she explained as the group turned their attentions on her. “Savant was her white whale.”

“Savant?” Felicity asked sharply.

“That’s his handle,” Lyla told her. “He got it because of the weird memory thing.”

“We don’t know why the League is targeting him. In any case, we need to get to him before they do. As I was saying,” Isabelle said, flipping to another screen. “Both targets must be brought back unharmed and intact. Our goal is to capture and protect at all costs.”

As Isabelle continued to drone on, Felicity’s mind conjured up memories of a night she’d long tried to keep suppressed but were now brought to the forefront by that name.

Savant.

The memory of hot summer rain and the fear on Slade’s face grated against her nerves as she heard his voice echo through her mind:

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“…I have it on the highest authority; the best information broker money can buy.”

***

The best information broker money can buy.

Brian Durlin was Savant; the same Savant who sold Slade the intel about her biological father, intel which she was absolutely convinced was false. Anthony Ivo was not her father; she was sure of it. After that night she’d almost been tempted to make sure, she’d found herself on the cusp of running a search a thousand times, but she’d resisted on the off-chance she was wrong. It had to be a lie though, right? The idea of her being Anthony Ivo’s daughter was preposterous. What are the chances that Oliver would randomly recruit the long lost daughter of the man who had killed and tortured the people closest to him on an island halfway around the world? No matter how soap opera things got in the Arrow Cave, there was no way; the odds on something like that would be astronomical.

But if Savant did sell that information to Slade then why did he lie? Why would he? His whole reputation as an information broker would be ruined, plus why was the League after him?

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“When you said you had friends, love, you weren’t kidding. This explains why he went after Savant, why he contacted me out of the blue; the olive branch the demon extended to both myself and Merlyn on the condition you be kept alive... It explains a lot actually.”

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Her father? Was that who Slade was referring to; Henri Ducard? Was he this ‘demon’ Slade feared? The League was after Slade and Merlyn; could he be connected to them as well?

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“…Not Lucifer or Satan; the Demon, love, and like the devil from whom he takes his name, he’s someone you don’t want to deal with unless you’re willing to trade away your soul…”
The Demon; Slade’s big bad. Ra’s called himself the Demon’s Head, Nyssa called herself the Heir to the Demon, so did that mean her father worked for the League? Was he one of Ra’s al Ghul’s ‘demons’? According to Slade, Ivo worked for the League but he was dead and he’d have no reason to fear a dead man, right? Or maybe he was some kind of broker like Savant? Tim said Deathstroke freelanced for the League; maybe Ducard was his middleman.

Fucking fantastic, Felicity cursed internally. Either my biological father was some rich European dick, a mad scientist, or a League asset. I wonder if Hallmark has a card for that? In any case, Brian Durlin knew; he’d have the answers she needed to figure it out once and for all. If he didn’t know then, well, either he was wrong when he gave Slade that information or he gave him false intel on purpose but to what end? Even though this had always been the one mystery she’d never wanted to solve, something told her she needed to get to Durlin. If for no other reason than to know just what Slade meant when he implied that her father had intervened on her behalf. Was he having her watched and, if so, then why? He abandoned them; why would he care what happened to her? And what kind of man had the power to strike fear into the heart of Slade Wilson?

Gypsy’s eyes again skittered in her direction and she felt a hint of annoyance creep up on her. Seriously, she was making her feel like she needed to throw a bag over her head. Helena looked a hell of a lot worse so why not stare at her instead?

She tried to shake it off and focus instead on the problem at hand. Right now her main concern was uncovering whatever was happening here in Orbital, figuring out the link between them and HIVE, find out more about this Miller situation from Isabel, and then she’d worry about Savant and whatever brand of crazy Slade was on right before he died. There was no way she could speak to Sara before she left; as soon as the meeting broke up they were headed to the airport to fly out to Siberia. It was a twelve hour flight but, hopefully, she could call her on the plane or find time to talk to her after she landed. Not that she expected Durlin to be particularly helpful after they took him into custody but maybe she could try asking him. If not, maybe she’d get a chance to speak to him when he got there but since the walls had ears she’d rather not go there; the less information about herself Isabel knew, the better.

“Any more questions?” Isabel asked.

“Yeah,” Helena said from the back of the room. “Why can’t we just kill the big guy and give your little science project his pills ourselves?”

She had a point, Felicity admitted internally. She looked at the picture of Creote again and winced. Yeah, taking down the red version of the Incredible Hulk wasn’t going to be fun. Taking him down alive *and* getting him all the way back here without him tearing through the entire team….yeah, dinner with Isabel wasn’t looking so bad after all.

“Both packages must be kept intact,” Isabel stressed. “The contract is for both men; not for one. It’s not open for debate; Creote and Savant must be kept alive.”

“Whatever,” Helena scoffed. “All I know is that there better be hazard pay on this one.”

“There will be along with a bonus should both the packages arrive in reasonably good health,” she said coolly. “And by ‘good health’, I mean without any crossbow bolts sticking out of their persons.”

“Well, if you’re going to take all the fun out of it…” Helena said with a roll of her eyes.

“Ms. Rochev?” The blond technician Wildcat had referred to as ‘Dave’ turned in his chair toward
them. “Ms. Tate is on line one asking if you’re available; should I let her know you’re in a meeting?”

“Tell her I’ll be with her momentarily,” she told him before turning back to the group. “If there are no other questions, I’ll let you be on your way. All the tactical information should be already uploaded to your tablets as well as dossiers on the targets. Dismissed.” She headed towards Felicity, “As soon as I finish this call we can be on our way,” she told her in a sotto purr, her eyes cutting to Sara who returned her look with a glare.

“Looking forward to it,” Felicity said, again resisting the urge to flinch back when Isabel ran her hand down her arm before heading into her office.

“That bitch is getting on my last damn nerve,” Sara growled, shooting daggers at her back as she disappeared behind the office door.

“She seems…pleasant,” Laurel said in a tone that implied she thought she was anything but.

Felicity rubbed her now throbbing temple wearily. “First the monkeys, then the madness, and now here comes the crap storm; this day is never going to end.”
Chapter Forty-Seven

Oliver set the mug in front of Bruce before drinking from his own cup without hesitation. Alfred, who was examining a spare packet of the herbs, shot Bruce a look that translated to ‘drink it or else’.

Bruce stared into the muddy green muck and gave the butler a look of his own which said, ‘No way in hell am I drinking this shit.’ When Queen began to smirk he realized that he might have actually said it out loud as well.

Felicity was beginning to rub off on him. Either that or Queen had rung his bell harder than he thought.

“Drink the tea, Master Bruce,” Alfred said in clipped tones.

“No without running an analysis on it first. This crap smells like—!” He sniffed it then reared back, putting it aside with a look of disgust. He turned to the butler again, “How do we know that stuff’s not poisonous?”

“It’s not poisonous; I’ve been using them for years,” Queen said with a snort as he drained his cup.

“That’s not saying much,” Bruce muttered. “What’s in it? It smells like piss, road kill, and tar.”

His condescending grin broadened and it was all Bruce could do not to put his fist through his face, “It’s some herbs from the island of Lian Yu. As far as I know, they don’t have a name and they only grow on that island; even then, they aren’t easy to find if you don’t know exactly what it is you’re looking for, but it’s worth the trip. They might smell and taste like hell but they can counteract just about any poison and heal even serious injuries like broken bones and gunshots within days.” He gestured toward his face which was swollen and purple on one side, “One full packet of herbs and the swelling should be gone by tonight. Within a couple of days the bruising should be completely gone and the fracture in your cheekbone will be pretty much healed.”

“Really?” Alfred asked, his interest peaked, “Fascinating. Have you had them analyzed?”

“No, I was afraid it might lead to people asking questions I didn’t want to have to answer. Besides, like I said, they can only be found on Lian Yu and, believe me, I’ve looked. I even tried transplanting them once but it didn’t take. I was afraid that if people knew what they could do they might try to overharvest them and then they’d be gone forever.”

Bruce gave the contents of the cup a second look. “What about long term side effects?”

“None that I’ve noticed,” he told him.

“Like I pointed out earlier, that’s not saying much,” he muttered.

“Meaning?” Queen asked in an almost bored tone that set his teeth on edge.

“Meaning that back in the day you probably would have been smoking this shit,” he told him flatly.

“Huh,” he said mockingly as he seemed to think about it, “You know, I never thought about smoking them before; maybe we should give it a shot. What do you say, Wayne? Do you want to whip out your bong or do guys from your generation prefer hookah pipes instead?”

He didn’t bother answering him, instead he just seethed with barely contained rage and admired the son of a bitch’s black eye and split lip.
Alfred rolled the packet of herbs around in his hand and looked at them a bit more closely. “I’m afraid my knowledge of herbalism is limited to the likes of those commonly used in cooking. I’d have to ask Mrs. Hu to be sure but I believe some of these are wild ginseng, possibly some type of ginger…”

“Mrs. Hu? You mean Peggy Ann; Felicity’s grandmother?” Oliver asked curiously.

Alfred nodded, “Mrs. Hu’s father was an herbalist and expert in phytotherapy in her native China. She, herself, is quite knowledgeable on the subject and frequently uses healing herbs in her cooking. She also blends her own teas which she prepares for Mr. Fox as a part of his health regimen. She may recognize some of them. May I have a pack or two? I’d like to have them analyzed if that’s alright? I’ll make sure to be discreet and, if they’re as effective as you say, then it might be something we’ll want to keep in the Batcave.”

“I don’t care if that shit cures cancer, I’m not drinking it,” Bruce said bad-temperedly.

“Scared Wayne?” Queen asked with another one of his smart-ass smirks.

“No, I’m just using my brain, unlike you,” Bruce snapped back. “I’m not putting some unknown substance in my body just on your say so.”

“It works,” he shrugged. “Felicity’s used the herbs, so have Diggle and Roy.”

Bruce’s jaw clenched at the reminder that Queen had gotten Felicity hurt so often that she now kept a stock of Queen’s ‘magic herbs’ on hand, “Think Queen; you said these herbs only grow on Lian Yu and nowhere else.”

“And?”

“You also said that these people who captured you on that island were looking for the Mirakuru serum.”

“Again, and?” He returned mockingly.

“According to you a group of Japanese scientists developed the serum which you found on Lian Yu. Coincidentally you find these ‘herbs’ that have incredible restorative powers on the same island. After we spoke, I got Barbara to get the reports on the Mirakuru serum from STAR labs. According to them, one of the side effects of Mirakuru is an accelerated healing factor. Did it never occur to you that perhaps these herbs were the basis of this Mirakuru formula in the first place?”

The smirk was instantly wiped off Queen’s face to be replaced by a scowl, “No, no it didn’t.”

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me,” Bruce said giving him another dirty look.

“What are you trying to say?” He asked.

“What I’m trying to say is that you’re reckless, Queen! You’re careless and you don’t think things through; you’re a goddamn menace to everyone and everything around you! I can’t believe you’d let Felicity take this shit without even---!” His lips thinned into a hard line and he shook his head, “Goddamn it, I should have known better; I sat right here at this counter and watched her drink that crap and I didn’t connect the dots.”

“Calm down,” the other man said with a hint of anger. “Whether the herbs are related to Mirakuru or not, they work and they don’t have any of the side effects of the serum; no hallucinations, no aggression issues, nothing! My entire team has used them and they’ve saved my life on more than
one occasion. Take them or don’t take them, I could care less, but I would have never allowed Felicity to use the herbs if I thought they were toxic.”

“Yeah, because you’d never put her in harm’s way, right Queen?” He chuckled humorlessly.

“Master Bruce, that’s enough,” Alfred said in a hard tone.

“No, it’s not,” he said turning to the elderly man. “It’s his fault she’s in this mess to begin with!”

“First of all, Miss Felicity is an intelligent young woman who makes her own decisions. Her affiliation with this organization was something she chose to pursue on her own. Also, if we’re to while away the afternoon with accusations and finger pointing then, need I remind you sir, that you had a hand in this situation as well. Orbital set up their offices in the Bat’s territory months ago; something you failed to notice.” His pale blue eyes were unforgiving in their intensity and Bruce felt himself flush under the older man’s stern gaze.

When Alfred wanted to he could make him feel like he was two inches tall. He and Felicity were the only two people he’d never been able to intimidate and who could, in turn, make him feel like a damned idiot with very little visible effort on their parts.

“Now, while I agree we should have these herbs analyzed, if for no other reason than to satisfy my own curiosity, you have to meet Mr. Fox shortly and have a press conference tomorrow. Having Bruce Wayne looking like he’d just come from a barroom brawl will hardly send the image Mr. Fox and Ms. Wells were hoping for.” Alfred picked up the mug and set it in front of him. “With that in mind, I suggest sir, that you drink the tea Mr. Queen has so generously prepared for you.”

He opened his mouth to protest but then he caught the sneer on Queen’s face. In response, he snatched the cup off the counter defiantly and chugged it…only to regret it instantly.

Although he didn’t think it was possible, it actually tasted worse than it smelled. He fought the urge to spit it out as soon as the thick, sludgy mess hit his palate. As soon as the cup was empty he sat it down with a heavy thunk, swallowing convulsively to avoid gagging it back up.

“Very good, sir,” Alfred said, taking the cup from him and rinsing it in the sink before placing it in the dishwasher.

Bruce cleared his throat, his eyes watering slightly, “Water.”

“You okay there, Wayne?” Queen asked, the shit-eating grin on his face widening in amusement.

He cleared his throat again and winced his tongue began to numb before throwing him a look of pure hatred. He wiped his hand over his mouth, his voice coming out in a harsh rasp, “I swear by all that’s holy, Queen; if I drank that crap for nothing then you’re going to be shitting teeth for a week.”

Alfred started to hand him a glass of water but pulled away just as Bruce reached for it, “Mr. Queen, is it advisable to drink this soon after taking the herbs?”

“Actually…” Queen began.

“I don’t care if it is or isn’t,” Bruce said snatching the glass from Alfred and gulping it down.

“I was just going to say that you should give it a minute or two before drinking anything else otherwise it un-numbs your taste buds,” Queen said with another grin.

As the taste of sulfur, burnt rubber, and decay washed over his tongue, Bruce had to fight the urge to
shudder, choosing instead to pin the man sitting next to him with another death glare.

“Once the tea is consumed, how long before it begins to show results?” Alfred asked curiously.

“The swelling should begin to go down rapidly and will probably be gone within an hour or two. He’ll still have bruises tomorrow but he could probably cover them up easily with a little concealer.” Again Queen shot him a malevolent smirk. “However, if you’re worried about looking pretty for the cameras, Wayne, you could always take another dose before bedtime.”

“I’d rather keep the black eye,” Bruce muttered darkly, getting up to refill his glass in the refrigerator door then downsing that one as well.

“My word,” Alfred murmured in astonishment as he looked at the little bundle of medicinal sachets once more. “Astounding.” He looked up at Queen again, “After we have these analyzed I would very much like to discuss a possible trip to this Lian Yu in order to collect more of these herbs. I know you said you’ve tried to cultivate them yourself once but I’m quite a deft hand at gardening and I’m sure I could make a few discreet inquiries to Mrs. Hu on how best to proceed. As I said, she’s somewhat of an expert; perhaps, with her help, we could find a way to grow them a bit closer to home?”

“You can try but, as I said, I wasn’t able to get it to take,” he said with a shrug. “It may have something to do with the conditions on the island itself.” His face darkened but his polite smile remained fixed as he addressed the older man. “Lian Yu is a volcanic island in the North China sea; lots of rock, silty soil, very harsh weather conditions. It’s burning hot during the day and frigid at night. My mother liked to grow orchids and our housekeeper grew organic vegetables so I tried mimicking some of the conditions by putting them in our old greenhouse using heat lamps and a mix of sand and soil but nothing happened. I even tried freezing the seeds before I planted them like our housekeeper suggested but they never germinated.”

“Where exactly is this island of yours located anyway?” Bruce asked reaching in the fridge again for a diet soda and unscrewing the top before taking a drink. Normally he loathed sickly sweet drinks, even ones that were artificially sweetened, but his mouth still tasted like a sewer.

Queen arched an eyebrow in his direction curiously, “I thought you already knew where it was?”

“I had intel about it being a League training ground but I didn’t even know that much until after you were rescued by that freighter a few years back,” he told him. “By then they had abandoned the island so it didn’t matter enough to me to find out. The League never stays in one place for long; it’s how they maintain their security. The only exception being Nanda Parbat because the magnetic ore within the mountain range that surrounds it makes it almost impossible to penetrate with radar and their defense network is second to none. Even if you tried sending in a drone strike it would be blown out of the sky long before it ever got there.”

“Fair enough,” Queen said with a nod, “It’s around two hundred miles from mainland China but you won’t find it on a map,” he told him. “It’s so remote that ARGUS now uses it as a super-max prison for criminals that can’t be housed safely anywhere else.”

Bruce frowned then set his soda on the counter before leaving the kitchen to retrieve his tablet despite there being one right there in the kitchen. He kept them in every room but he needed a minute to cool down and it gave him an excuse to get away from the smug son of a bitch if only for a minute. He walked into his and Felicity's bedroom, breathing in her lingering scent in order to calm his frayed nerves, before retrieving the tablet from the charging station on her side of the bed. When he returned to the kitchen he pulled up a map of the area in question and handed it to Queen. “Show me.”
He located the coordinates and enlarged it. “See this string of small volcanic islands in the Yellow Sea?” He pointed to a point north of the Paracel Islands in the middle of the Pacific, “That’s Lian Yu.”

Bruce took the tablet and stared at it, his brow furrowed as something tickled at his memory. When it finally hit him his jaw clenched in aggravation, “Damn it!” Both Alfred and Queen looked at him in confusion, “I think I just figured out the secret ingredient those Japanese scientists used to create the Mirakuru serum and why it made its victims go insane.”

Queen looked at him, “What do you mean you figured it out?”

He sighed, suddenly reminded of just how long this day had been and feeling very, very tired, “Have you ever heard of Ley Lines or the Vile Vortices?”

Alfred’s mouth tightened into a grimace as understanding dawned but Queen just shook his head, “No, what are they and what do they have to do with Lian Yu and the Mirakuru serum?”

“A lot apparently; it also might explain how you got on Ra’s al Ghul’s radar to begin with,” Bruce ground out. He turned to Alfred, “Call Lucius and tell him I’ve been held up. If he can’t wait then tell him I’ll just take a later flight instead.” He looked back down at the map then at Queen, “This might take a while.”

“I really wish you weren’t going out with her tonight,” Sara said stubbornly.

“Sara…” Felicity sighed.

“Okay, fine; go, but I expect you to call me later and tell me what happened,” Sara said with a pout. “And she better not even get a whiff of cookie or I will go full tilt League of Assassins on her ass.”

“Wait, you’re not really thinking about giving her the full-on happy ending, right?” Laurel asked in a hushed whisper.

“No!” She said defensively. “It’s just dinner.”

“Are you sure she knows that?” Sara grumbled.

“Whether she does or not, dinner is as far as I’m going,” she told her with an exasperated huff.

“Good, because I hate to tell you but she’s got the crazy-eyes and I should know,” Laurel said. “I just spent the last three months in a vegan nuthatch with a bunch of women who were forced to give up chocolate, coffee, and sex in exchange for hot yoga, grass smoothies, and directed meditation seminars.” She raised her eyebrows in emphasis, “I know from crazy, trust me.”

“No, I’m--!” Felicity scowled then looked at both women, “I’m not discussing this again.”

“Whatever,” Sara moped.

“Will you knock it off?” She said, rolling her eyes at the other woman. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m not being ridiculous,” Sara told her petulantly. “I’m jealous; there’s a difference.” She shuffled her feet and looked down at the floor. “You know, *I* wouldn’t have minded going out on the town every once in a while. I mean, if I knew you wanted to be wined and dined I could’ve done that with you a long time ago instead of just sitting around at home eating dinner with my dad followed by
listening to him saw logs on the couch while we watch DVDs. All you had to do was say something.”

“Fine,” Felicity told her. “When you get back we’ll have a girl’s night. A real one.”

“Really?” Sara asked, brightening slightly.

“We’ll even go dancing,” she told her with a crooked smile. “Real dancing; not some crowded nightclub with overpriced drinks and guys who wear Axe body spray. We’re talking Fred and Ginger type ballroom dancing. I’ll even let you be Fred if you want.”

“I always wanted to be Fred,” Sara admitted reluctantly. “Actually I always wanted to be Gene Kelly instead.”

“I know; I’m the one who had to hear you massacre ‘Singing in the Rain’ in the shower, remember?” Felicity said wryly.

“Hey, I sound like a flippin’ diva in the shower,” she said in a huff. “I can sing the crap out of that song.”

Felicity gave her a withering glare, “Fine, you’re the Aretha Franklin of the shower serenade; do you want to go out when you get back from Siberia or not?”

Sara looked at her sullenly, her bottom lip pooshed out in an expression that seemed completely at odds with her reputation as a former master assassin, “I really get to be Fred?”

Felicity rolled her eyes at her once more, “Yes.”

“Okay,” she conceded reluctantly.

“That sounds fun; can I come?” Laurel asked hopefully. “I mean, I understand if you don’t want me to tag along but, um…?”

Sara looked to Felicity before answering her. At her slight nod, she turned to her sister, “Yeah, sure; why not?”

She beamed at her, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Sara said, smiling back. “I’ve…I’ve kind of missed you. It’d be nice to just hang out again.”

“I’d like that,” Laurel said in relief. “I haven’t been out in forever; I’m really looking forward to doing something that doesn’t involve getting into a lotus position or reciting the Serenity Prayer.”

Sara’s brow furrowed and she looked at her sister curiously, “I meant to ask; how’re things going with mom and the yoga instructor?”

“Don’t even get me started on the Vegan Nazi,” the other woman said with a scowl. “Mr. ‘I don’t eat anything with a face and I’m better than you because Meat is Murder,’” she said mockingly. “Maybe if he ate a Big Mac every once in a while and tried shutting the hell up about his Kundalini he wouldn’t come off as a complete and utter douchebag.”

“Seriously, don’t…don’t get her started,” Felicity said giving Sara a warning look.

“Alrighty then,” Sara said, raising her eyebrows and rocking back on her heels.

“Hi.”
Felicity turned to see that the girl who had been staring at her all throughout the meeting had wandered over to where they were standing. Gypsy, she reminded herself. Her long black hair was held back with a colorful silk bandana but, other than that, she looked nothing like her handle and she definitely didn’t look like a metahuman. Not that most metahumans looked all that different from normal people, she corrected mentally, but every one of them she’d met so far seemed to stand out in her mind for some reason. Even Barry, after his change, had made her, not uncomfortable exactly, but nervous and almost hyperaware of his presence.

This girl though, standing there dressed in her high-top tie-dyed Chuck Taylors, skinny jeans, and Arctic Monkeys tee-shirt, just looked like a normal college freshman. In fact, maybe it was her age or just a touch of homesickness, but every time she looked at her she found herself comparing her to Thea. She’d grown rather fond of Oliver’s sister, so much so that she almost thought of her as her own younger sibling. For some reason this girl seemed to give off a similar vibe of kinship that she simply couldn’t explain despite the fact that she’d spent the last several minutes giving her strange looks from across the room.

If Thea were there she’d probably have stormed up to Gypsy and asked her what her problem was by now. The younger girl was fearless and feisty, not to mention fun and sarcastic, and had a way of filling the entire room with her presence. She was probably just focused on Gypsy because she missed having her around. She’d call her later and catch up; maybe she could even get her to come down to Gotham for a few days just to hang out when all this was done.

She turned her attention back to the dark haired girl in front of her. Gypsy’s eyes skimmed over her once more, her expression of nervousness combined with curiosity had Felicity again wondering why she was so fixated on her. She glanced down at her shirt; nope, nothing unbuttoned and no coffee stains or schmutz. Something had her attention though, that was obvious.

“You’re Cindy, right?” Sara asked, her own sharp gaze sweeping over the other woman as she too had apparently noticed her odd behavior.

“Cynthia,” she corrected, taking her eyes off Felicity long enough to answer her. “But everybody just calls me Gypsy. It’s one of the reasons I picked it as my handle. And you’re Canary?”

“You can call me Sara when we’re not in the field,” she said as she shook the girl’s hand in greeting.

“Cool,” she nodded then turned to Laurel.

“Oh, uh Laurel,” she said taking her hand as well. “I’m Sara’s sister and my handle is—”

“Manhunter,” Gypsy finished for her. “Yeah, wicked awesome handle by the way.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Laurel said with a chuckle.

She turned to look at Felicity, a hint of uneasiness reflected in her bright blue eyes, “Can I…talk to you for a minute?” Gypsy fidgeted, her eyes skittering away from her nervously as she spoke.

Felicity turned from Laurel and Sara to the younger woman, “Uh sure.”

“In private?” Gypsy asked, looking over at the other women apologetically.

“Will you guys excuse us?” Felicity asked looking at the other woman questioningly.

“Yeah, no problem. I need to go over some stuff with Katana real quick anyway,” Sara said, arching an eyebrow.
“I’ll join you,” Laurel told her, giving the peculiar young woman a slightly bemused look.

She waited until her friends were at a safe distance before addressing the younger woman, “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Not here,” she told her, biting her lip. “There’s an empty office across from the training area; can we…?”

“Sure,” she said, her eyebrows drawing together as she spared the girl another look. Sara caught her eye as Gypsy led the way across Ops and mouthed the word ‘weird’. Felicity nodded and blew out a frustrated breath. And the hits just keep on coming…

When they got to the office, Gypsy held the door open and Felicity brushed past her.

//Bright Lady.//

“Did you say something?” Felicity asked as the whispered words seem to buzz across the edge of her audible range.

“Ah, no,” she said slowly, shutting the door behind her.

“Are you sure?” She asked, “Because I could have sworn I just heard you say something like ‘bright lady’ just now.” She paused, “Actually that’s the second time I’ve heard that today.”

“Really?” She asked with a squeak.

“Yeah, why?” She said narrowing her eyes at her suspiciously. “I kept hearing some guy with a Japanese accent talking over what sounded like coms or a radio transmission; do you know who that was? I thought I was the only one who heard him but he used the same phrase you did; ‘bright lady’. What does that mean?”

“Japanese guy?” Gypsy’s mouth opened in surprise and she began to fidget again, “Uh, yeah, I don’t…I mean, I didn’t think I said anything but, um…” She bit her lip again and moved closer to Felicity, her voice dropping to a near whisper, “Who are you?”

“Excuse me?” Felicity asked.

“Who are you?” She repeated quietly.

Felicity looked at her in confusion, her mouth opening then closing without speaking. Okay…that’s kind of an odd--

Wait, Isabel did introduce her to the team over the video conference, right? Yeah, yes she did; she distinctly remembered that bit but then why…?

She looked at the younger woman again. Maybe she had a bad signal? Well, in that case no wonder she kept staring at her all through the meeting, she thought with a mental shrug.

“Oh, uh, I’m sorry. I thought you knew who I was; my bad. Felicity Smoak,” she told her holding out her hand in greeting, “Well, Felicity Smoak-Fox but I go by Smoak at work so, yeah. Just…just call me ‘Felicity’ though, so…” The younger woman frowned without reaching to take her hand, her cheeks reddening in obvious frustration. Felicity dropped her arm to her side awkwardly, “Oh, unless you mean my handle? ‘Starling’,” she said with a hint of embarrassment as she wrinkled her nose. “I know, it’s not exactly exciting or awe inspiring but it was the only thing I could come up with.”
Gypsy’s mouth twisted in consternation, “No, I mean *what* are you?” She asked in a slightly louder voice.

“The new Director?” The younger woman scowled at her and she shook her head in response, “I’m sorry, I don’t quite know what you want me to say here.” Something was definitely off about this girl. Well, she did tell Isabel that all masks had their quirks, but still…

Gypsy rolled her eyes reminding Felicity that she couldn’t be more than eighteen or so, “I know that; I’m asking what it is you can do.”

That’s a bit presumptuous, Felicity thought. What does she want; my résumé or something? “Pretty much anything, I guess,” she said slowly. “I mean, not to toot my own horn but I know my way around a computer and I can hold my own in a fight.” She paused, “Wait, I take that back; I can do pretty much anything except sewers, I don’t do those anymore. That and giant spiders; and by giant I mean like the big bird eating kind. Those things and kangaroos are the two biggest reasons why I’m definitely never going to Australia.”

“No, I mean—look,” she licked her lips nervously and stepped a bit closer, “I saw it, okay?”

“Saw what?” Felicity asked blankly.

“With Isabel…” she said meaningfully.

She shook her head, “Isabel?”

Oh. Oh! Hang on…

She narrowed her eyes, “Are you…are you asking if I’m gay? Because whether I am or not, it really shouldn’t make a difference. I mean, I’m sorry if the kiss Sara gave me earlier or Isabel’s flirting made you uncomfortable, I don’t usually engage in PDA in the office, but still, it’s really none of your business what I do in my personal life or who I do it with. If you have a problem with that then- -!

“No! God, no!” The girl in front of her heaved a frustrated sigh, “I mean, come on! Seriously! I don’t give a crap about that; I’m asking what kind of metahuman you are?! What do you do; what are your powers? Jeez!”

“Metahuman?” She repeated.

“Yeah!” The other woman said, not even bothering to try to whisper anymore. “You’re like me, right? Are you a metahuman, an alien, or what?”

“No,” she chuckled in surprise. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Come on,” she said, her head tilted in a skeptical bent.

“I’m not a metahuman,” she repeated.

“Okay, listen,” she said, leaning against the corner of the desk. “I get it, okay? I get the whole keeping it on the down low thing but you don’t have to hide it from me; it’s cool.”

She blinked, “I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about,” Felicity said sincerely.

She gave her a look that bordered on pity, “I saw it; it’s one of my abilities. I don’t just cast illusions, I can see through them as well,” she told her. “I can also see energy patterns; they’re kind of like
auras and yours lit up like you wouldn’t believe the minute Isabel came near you which I totally get because she creeps me out big time.” She swept her eyes over her clinically, “You aren’t actively using them right now though; it’s just a low sort of background hum. What is it, some kind of limited telepathy or an empathic thing because your aura is this really bright white with a bright blue center and that usually means it’s a passive ability, more defensive than offensive, which is cool because that means your abilities might be similar to mine.”

This is one really fucked up, long-ass day, Felicity thought irritably, “Look, I don’t know what you’re seeing right now but I’m not a metahuman; I’m a tech; I even went to MIT! I have no powers whatsoever.”

She let out a huff of irritation, “Okay, look; enough playing around. I’m not one of them, okay? I can see your light so you can stop pretending.”


“I saw you use it on Isabel,” she prompted. “I mean, you were lit up like a freaking glow stick throughout the entire meeting. It was actually pretty distracting to tell you the truth.”

Felicity held up a finger, “Okay, listen, you and I—?” She gestured between them, “We’re obviously working on two very different wavelengths here because I have no fricking clue what you’re talking about and, no offence, but you may want to consider going on some sort of medication.”

The other girl blinked at her, “Are you being for reals? Like totally no McBullshit serious?”

“Oh, yeah; like *totally* ‘no McBullshit’,” she confirmed in a deadpan. “Fo-shizzle, disco, and you’re darn tootin’ for reals. Or, as we say it back home; yes, I am being completely serious right now.”

Her eyes grew large as understanding finally appeared to dawn on her, “Oh wow, I just thought you knew.”

“Knew what?” Felicity asked as she came dangerously close to the end of her rope.

“That you were like me,” she told her.

“I’m not a metahuman,” Felicity repeated for what felt like the umpteenth time.

“No, I mean, well, technically, neither am I.”

She looked at her blankly, “Say what now?”

“Okay, well, see I told them I was,” she said, gesturing towards the door, “but I’m not. At least not in the strictest sense of the word.”

Felicity nodded even though she was more lost than ever, “Okay…you know that--?” She made a swirling gesture with her finger and glanced around the room pointedly.

“Bugs? Took ‘em offline,” she told her. “I had Mordred cut the feeds so we could talk. Technically they only activate when the room is occupied anyway so he just told the computer that we weren’t here.”

“Good, great; okay,” she cleared her throat, “I know I’m going to regret this because, heh heh, I already do, but if you aren’t a meta then what are you?”
“I’m Roma and my clan is Mughat,” she said simply.

“Yeah, and…?”

“No, I mean I’m Phral, the real deal; my family can trace our ancestors all the way back to Babylon and the Phuri Dae. My puri daj, grandmother, had some of the same abilities I have and every first born female of every generation has possessed some sort of gift from clairvoyance to the ability to read auras. She used to say that I was a throwback to the ancient Drabarni and Magi of our line; a Satarma or one who has been touched by the spirits. She also warned me about keeping my abilities hidden but I didn’t listen,” she grimaced. “That’s why I’m here. ARGUS caught up with me back in Detroit when I was in the park doing some illusions for the tourists. I needed to make some quick cash and I guess they thought I was a meta so they totally patriot acted my ass and tossed me in a detention facility.”

“Okay,” she said with a frown. “So you were born with your abilities but how does that not make you metahuman and why keep it a secret?”

“Technically meta-humans were created by that particle accelerator thingie but I already had my abilities way before that thing went ‘boom’,” she told her. “I didn’t tell anybody because I didn’t want anyone going after my grandma or the rest of my family, not that I think anybody here would,” she said quickly. “I mean, this place is way better than ARGUS, but I didn’t want to take the chance, y’know? It’s one of the reasons I cut ties; I didn’t want to lead anyone back to them.”

“I get that,” she said completely understanding that particular impulse herself. “So your family has always had metas—or people who had meta adjacent abilities?”

“Pretty much,” she nodded. “My grandma used to say our tribe was descended from the Children of Inanna, the first of our line, and that they were a gift from the Bright Lady herself; that’s why I wanted to talk to you. Are you Roma like me by any chance? If so, what clan are you from?” She asked curiously. “I’ve never seen an aura like that outside of my own kompaniyi.”

“I am…totally not understanding a single word you’re saying,” Felicity said shaking her head. “I mean, don’t get me wrong; I can understand the words coming out of your mouth but the meaning behind them?” She swung her hand over her head in a cutting gesture, “Totally lost.”

“What do you know about the Roma? You know, gypsies?” She asked her.

“Other than they like tambourines and make interesting fashion statements, not much,” she said honestly.

“Okay…” she sighed, “Look, I don’t have time to get into the whole history lesson but, long story short, you’re like me.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that already.”

She rolled her eyes again, “Look, you can’t tell me you’ve never noticed it. I mean seriously, I saw how strong you are. Even my grandmother’s aura isn’t as bright as yours; I could hardly keep my eyes off you. Whatever powers you’ve got are major badass.”

“Unless hacking counts, and it totally should, I don’t have any superpowers,” she told her firmly. “And, despite what might have thought you saw going on between me and Isabel, I didn’t do anything to her nor do I intend to.” ‘For reals’ on that, too, she thought ruefully.

“Fine,” Gypsy said in a way that let Felicity know she was anything but ‘fine’. “Look, like I said; I get why you’d want to stay in the closet. I’m just saying that when you’re ready to talk I’m here to
listen, okay? I’ve been there so I know what you’re going through.”

“Closet? “Ah…okay.”

The other woman’s expression softened, “And hey, when you are ready, just so you know, most of these guys are pretty cool. I know I said that already but they really are nothing like ARGUS here. No one has ever made me feel like a freak and all they ever asked me for is a blood sample; that’s it. They gave me a place to live, a paycheck, and they’re even letting me work around my class schedule whereas Amanda Waller’s flunkies had me locked in a cell and strapped to a table 24/7.” She glanced at her watch, “Look, I better go.” She offered her another smile, “I mean it, when you’re ready you and I can get together and talk, okay? Maybe we could even work out together. It’d be nice to have someone around that I can practice my abilities with.”

Felicity sighed, “Thanks but, trust me, if I had anything to talk about I would, but I don’t. Really. If I was a meta I’d tell you but I’m not.”

“Okay,” the other woman said giving her a patronizing look. “Hey, whatever you say; no pressure.”

Screw it, she thought. “Right. Yeah. Thanks, I…appreciate it,” Felicity returned with a wry grimace.

God, it was like trying to talk to Thea about…well, just about anything really. She loved her but Thea could be even more stubborn than Bruce when she wanted to be. She had a feeling that Gypsy could give both of them a run for their money.

“No problem, laters!” The younger woman said brightly before walking out of the office and heading back to Cyber-Ops.

Felicity stared after her retreating form, “That was…bizarre.”

“Okay, so what the hell are ley lines and what do they have to do with the Mirakuru?” Oliver asked, pinning the other man with a dirty look.

“How much do you know about Ra’s al Ghul?” Wayne asked him. They were alone in the kitchen, Alfred having gone into the study to call Lucius and let him know that the other man had been held up.

“Not a lot,” he answered honestly. “Why don’t you just tell me what it is I need to know and I’ll stop you if I’ve already heard it.”

The other man grimaced, “Ra’s isn’t just a master assassin; he’s a mystic. He uses these chemical pools he calls the Lazarus Pits to heal himself and to extend his life. These pits are located all over the world along ley lines which are mystical lines of convergence that follow a icosahedron grid. Where these ley lines intersect are sometimes called ‘vile vortices’ or Vortexes of Energy because they usually align with places of great mystical power like Stonehenge, the Bermuda Triangle, Easter Island, and Lake Baikal just to name a few. Although it’s not a hard and fast rule, these Lazarus Pits are almost always located where these lines converge and Ra’s has spent centuries hunting them down.”

Oliver looked at him, “Centuries?” He repeated dubiously.

The other man grimaced, “Ra’s is almost seven hundred years old; possibly even older than that, we just don’t know.”
“You know what I said earlier about how the herbs didn’t have any side effects?” Oliver said with a hint of sarcasm, “I’m starting to think that they might have some after all.”

“Damn it,” Wayne muttered, rubbing his forehead wearily before pinning him with an unamused scowl. “Look, I realize it sounds crazy but you’ve seen super-soldiers, metahumans, and drink something that tastes like it came out of a dead monkey’s ass that can heal wounds at an exponential rate; I’m telling you that these pits exist and that Ra’s has used them for hundreds of years. They can heal any wound in minutes, restore youth to the bather, and even restore the dead to life depending on how long they’ve been down. The problem is that using them drives the bather insane, at least temporarily, and that each bather can only use each Pit once. If you’re exposed for too long or if you overuse the waters then that psychosis becomes permanent.”

“And you think that Lian Yu has one of these Lazarus Pits?” He asked with a frown.

“I don’t know,” Wayne said as he picked the tablet back up again. “I do know that Lian Yu happens to be in an area where those lines intersect and that it was also a training ground for the League of Assassins; add to that your magic herbs and this Mirakuru serum and it seems like a bit more than a coincidence.”

Oliver found his mind wandering back to something Slade had told him, or rather Felicity, right before he died. “Slade told Felicity that Ra’s had bankrolled Anthony Ivo’s research into the Mirakuru.”

“Ivo?” Wayne asked.

“He was the scientist in charge of finding the Mirakuru,” Oliver told him. “It was his men who tortured me and hunted us. The man was a sadist; his obsession with acquiring the serum had driven him insane.” He debated about whether or not to share the rest of what he knew but, after a moment’s hesitation, he spoke up, “According to Slade he was also Felicity’s biological father.”

“That’s impossible,” Wayne said instantly. “Felicity doesn’t know who her biological father is and neither does anyone else for that matter. Her mother didn’t even know his name.”

“Actually, Felicity does know his name,” Oliver corrected.

He sneered at him slightly, “Look Queen, I don’t know where Slade got his intel but this Ivo person wasn’t her father.”

Oliver smiled at him coldly, a flicker of satisfaction curling in his gut at the realization that he apparently knew things about Felicity’s past that the other man didn’t, “I didn’t say that she said it was Ivo. When Slade told her Ivo was her father she told him her biological father’s name was Henri Ducard.”

Wayne stilled and gave him a penetrating look, “You’re sure of that; that Felicity said ‘Henri Ducard’ was her father?”

“Positive, why?” He said frowning as he caught the shocked expression on the other man’s face. “Who is Henri Ducard? What do you know?”

The other man’s mouth tightened, his expression grim, “Henri Ducard was an Interpol Agent I met in Paris before I took up the cowl. He trained me along with his son, Morgan, in counter-terrorism and intelligence gathering. I found out years later that he was dirty; he was playing both sides of the fence and freelancing as an assassin on the side.” He shook his head, “I don’t know where Felicity got that idea but there’s no way Ducard was Felicity’s father.”
“Are you sure?”

“Anything’s possible, but it’s highly improbable.” Wayne’s expression darkened, “The Algerian Civil War would have been in full swing around the time Evie became pregnant with Felicity and the Armed Islamic Group was highly active in Paris at that time. Besides the hijacking of Air France Flight 8969 and the attempt on the Eifel Tower, they had been taking credit for several bombings around Europe. Ducard was assigned to head a special taskforce in order to hunt them down; he became obsessed with taking them out. There’s no way he could’ve or would have left Paris long enough to enjoy a one night stand in Las Vegas while all that was going on. Still, I can’t be 100% sure until I find out where Felicity got that information. My guess is that she might have run across his name in one of my files and misunderstood…”

“What do you mean ‘misunderstood’?” Oliver asked with a frown. “What was there to misunderstand; what’s their connection?”

“Ducard’s first wife was a fellow assassin named Felicity Strode; maybe she saw her name and tried to piece together connections that weren’t there.”

“Felicity Strode?” He repeated in surprise. “You have to admit that’s an interesting coincidence; Felicity Strode/Felicity Smoak…?”

“That’s all it is though; a coincidence,” Wayne said firmly, “Ducard’s wife died long before she was even born. Early in my career with Interpol, Ducard and I were tasked with taking down a terrorist cell run by a French Algerian by the name of Jeremiah Hassan who was the leader of a GIA splinter group. Rumor was that he was one of the masterminds of the failed attempt to take out the Eifel Tower but he’d been active for years before that. Ducard had been after the man for decades, long before I ever came to Paris. They had…a history;” he scowled.

“A history?” Oliver asked.

“That’s where Felicity Strode comes in,” he told him. “Several years before I even met Ducard, his wife was a GIA asset. She was sent by Hassan to get close to Ducard in order to feed the cell intel about his investigation before killing him. She got pregnant with Morgan instead and they got married after she faked her death in order to escape Hassan. I never knew that part of course, at least not when I was helping him track down the members of Hassan’s terrorist cell. When we finally caught up with Hassan himself, Ducard killed him in cold blood instead of arresting him like we were supposed to. I broke ties after that. Later I found out that the reason he killed him was that years earlier some of Hassan’s cell members caught up with Felicity and threatened her; they tried to force her into carrying out her task to kill Ducard or they’d go after her son. Morgan overheard their conversation and killed her with a kitchen knife in order to protect his father. At the time he was only twelve years old.”

“Jesus,” Oliver said, feeling a wave of revulsion wash over him. “What about this Morgan, what happened to him?”

“At first, nothing,” he said coolly. “His father decided to train him as an assassin after he found out why he killed his mother. When I showed up in Paris he tried to partner us together but Morgan was violent and unstable. After I was forced to take him down, Ducard disowned him and he later became a freelance assassin who worked under the handle ‘NoBody’. He…died three and a half, almost four years ago,” Wayne’s features were again lost in shadows and Oliver got the feeling that he was holding something back.

“Did you kill him?”
“No,” he said in a low timbre. “But I know who did.”

“Who?”

“One of my former protégés; someone who Morgan tried to turn into an asset in order to get to me but who took him out instead. Doesn’t matter,” the other man said coldly. “He’s dead and so is Morgan.”

Oliver nodded. He could’ve pushed it but Wayne was right, it didn’t matter, “Fine.” He frowned, “What about this Morgan guy? Could he be Felicity’s father? After all, his mother’s name was Felicity; maybe she was named after her?”

“As I said, Morgan was highly unstable,” Bruce said reluctantly. “Had Felicity been his daughter he would have used that knowledge to his advantage.”

“How can you be sure?” Oliver asked him, “If she was his daughter--?”

“That wouldn’t have mattered to him.” He grimaced, “The only person he cared about was his father and Henri Ducard refused to even acknowledge him. That’s the reason he was fixated with taking me down; he blamed me for alienating him from his father in the first place. Ducard would often pit the two of us against each other while we were training and Morgan usually came up short as a result; he always resented me for that. He used to accuse me of looking for a surrogate father and say that I ‘stole’ Ducard’s affections from him. The only thing he was interested in after that was revenge. The idea of using someone I cared about as a weapon against me would have greatly appealed to him even if it meant killing his own child. He would have used Felicity to draw me out then ordered D--,” he stopped, his jaw clenching, “ordered the asset he was attempting to turn to kill her, just as he killed his own mother, so he could watch me suffer before taking me down.” He paused again, “Of course, I could be wrong; he might have been her father and just never knew about Evie’s pregnancy but we were around the same age so he couldn’t have been more than sixteen or seventeen years old when she was conceived. Since he was still in school I sincerely doubt Henri would have let him travel all the way to America alone.”

“So it’s a dead end,” Oliver said in frustration.

“Lucius searched for Felicity’s biological father for years,” Wayne told him. “He never found him and Felicity never even bothered to look as far as I know. Whoever fed Slade his information was either wrong or he was lying.”

“But why?” Oliver said mostly to himself. “And why tell him Ivo was her father to begin with unless they wanted him to target Felicity?”

“What do you mean?” Wayne asked, his voice dropping to an icy registry.

“Ivo was the one who murdered Shado, the woman Slade was obsessed with,” he told him. “Slade blamed me for her death because I couldn’t stop him. Before he died he transferred that obsession he had for Shado to Felicity instead.” He shook his head, “Whoever told Slade that Ivo was her father probably thought he’d go after her but he didn’t; instead he thought he was in love with her and that he needed to save her from me.”

“Who was it that gave him that information?” Wayne demanded harshly. “Could it have been the same person who ordered the hit?”

“I don’t know but I’m starting to wonder,” Oliver said grimly. He sighed, “Fuck! Is it just me or does this whole thing feel like a tangled mess? HIVE, Orbital, Slade, Ducard, Ivo, the League, this
mysterious hit on Felicity’s life; what the hell is going on? What is it we’re fighting here because every time I think I have some idea of what it is we’re doing, something else crops up. And now you’ve got me wondering about the link between the goddamn serum and Ra’s! I feel like I’m being pulled in fifty different directions at once!”

Wayne’s expression stilled, “What if we’re not; what if…?” He shook his head, “Never mind.”

Oliver looked at him, his eyes searching his expression for clues as to what the other man was thinking, “What?”

“It’s nothing.” Wayne said dismissively, taking another sip from his soft drink and grimacing. “For a second there I wondered if there wasn’t some connection we’re missing; that perhaps all these events aren’t as random as they seem at first.”

At that moment Alfred reentered the room. He looked at his employer curiously, “How so, sir?”

“I don’t know,” Wayne said.

“Talk it out,” Oliver told him.

He looked at him with a scowl, “What?”

“It’s what Felicity has me do all the time in the Lair, “ he offered reluctantly. “She used to accuse me of keeping everything in my head and leaving the rest of the team in the dark so she started making me talk it out that way we could bounce ideas off each other and help catch the connections that might have otherwise been missed.”

“A very astute suggestion if I do say so, sir,” Alfred told him. “Perhaps, in this case, you’d do well to follow Mr. Queen’s council.”

“Fine,” Wayne said, his tone more than a bit surly. He took a moment as though struggling with the idea before finally speaking, “Let’s look at what we know so far: Ra’s al Ghul sends this Ivo to Lian Yu in order to find this Mirakuru, probably because he suspected it was linked to the Lazarus Pits. Queen here winds up on the island and gets tangled up in all this mess. Next thing you know, he’s going after criminals as the Arrow and suddenly the League is sending him reinforcements the first time he gets in over his head--!”

“Hang on!” Oliver cut in, “They didn’t send in any reinforcements.”

“What about Nyssa and her honor guard?” Wayne asked.

“Sara brought them in,” he said firmly. “Right before Slade killed my mother she went to Nanda Parbat to find Nyssa so she could help her; I never asked her for her help, she was there for Sara.”

“No,” Wayne told him. “That’s not how the League works. I don’t know what Nyssa told Canary but the only way she could have gone back to Starling with her entire honor guard in tow would be if she was given express permission by Ra’s himself. Had Nyssa gone against her father’s wishes or tried to take off without his permission, her own men would have risen up and killed her and everyone else.”

“So what are you trying to say?” Oliver demanded. “That Ra’s al Ghul was trying to protect me personally? I’m not League, Wayne; I don’t give a damn whether you believe me or not.”

He pinned him with a hard look, “I didn’t say you were but, for whatever reason, Ra’s decided to protect your city against attack and not for the first time either. I know for a fact that Merlyn was
League and after he took down the Glades, Ra’s sent out an order to have him killed on sight.” He scowled, “It’s just a theory but Ra’s is constantly looking for a way of extending his life which is why he probably had Ivo looking for the Mirakuru to begin with. Maybe he thinks you can lead him to the Mirakuru or that you have something he finds valuable.”

“Like what?” Oliver asked. “I’d never even heard of these ‘Lazarus Pits’ before you mentioned them just now.”

“Sir, if Ra’s had men all over the island, wouldn’t they have found something; another Pit perhaps?” Alfred posited.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Wayne said, his brow furrowed in thought. “You said this was a volcanic island; did you happen to find any hot water springs while you were there?”

“A few; why?” He asked.

“Did any of them exhibit some sort of bioluminescence?”

“Like a bright green glow by any chance?”

He looked at him sharply, “So the answer is yes?”

“No, but the Mirakuru was green and it had a glow to it,” he told him. “None of the springs I found contained any sort of bioluminescence though.”

“What about these herbs of yours?” Wayne asked picking up one of the sachets and examining it again. “You said they were hard to find unless you knew where to look; where do they grow?”

“Near any caverns or underground springs perhaps?” Alfred suggested as he moved towards the coffee pot. “As I recall from Master Bruce’s research, many of these pools are hidden deep within the earth.”

“Different places but, you’re right, mostly around the entrance to some of the caverns where there’s protection from the wind and the temperature remains stable or near the hot springs,” he said thoughtfully. “You think that maybe the herbs were fed by the waters from these pools and that’s where their healing effects come from? Wouldn’t they induce the same side effects as the Mirakuru then?”

“You said yourself that the herbs neutralize all sorts of toxins,” Alfred pointed out. “Perhaps something in the way the plants metabolize the waters of the Lazarus Pits counteract their side effects? Ra’s would find something like that extremely valuable, sir. Of course, if he already had control of the island and the Pit then why would he need Mr. Queen?”

“He’s got a point,” Oliver nodded towards the elderly gentleman who was busy hunting through the cabinets for the coffee beans and filters. “If Ra’s people had control of the island then why would he need to keep me alive and what does that have to do with Felicity or anything else that’s going on for that matter?”

Wayne grimaced, “Probably nothing but I still find it interesting that these herbs, the Mirakuru, and you all center around Lian Yu which happens to also be located on an island controlled by the League. I also think it’s interesting that Ra’s seems invested enough in you to see to it you’re kept alive and that someone knew that which would explain why they went through a non-League broker to arrange the hit on Felicity. Perhaps they were trying to avoid drawing Ra’s’ attention back to Starling?”
“But if they were after Mr. Queen then why target Miss Felicity?” Alfred asked, switching on the pot. “By the way, would either of you gentlemen like me to fix you something? I believe I noticed some deli meats and cheeses in the refrigerator or I can have something delivered.”

“What did Lucius say?” Wayne asked him.

“That he would go ahead and meet you in Washington DC tomorrow morning for a breakfast meeting with Mr. White and the Daily Planet’s attorney, Mr. Power, followed by a visit to Bethesda Medical Center where Ms. Lane is being treated. Afterwards they have a quick press conference planned followed by a flight back to Metropolis to speak with the head of Wayne Publishing. Ms. Wells sent you the itinerary via email.”

“Wait; since when am I going to DC?” He demanded. “Wells told me it was just a quick trip to Metropolis and back!”

Oliver had to fight the urge to grin at the other man’s obvious frustration. Frankly, the longer he was out of town the better. It would give him more time to talk to Felicity and maybe get her to see reason so he could convince her to come back with him to Starling. The fact that Wayne appeared to see his presence as a threat, only encouraged him.

“From what I understand, Ms. Lane collapsed during the Senate Inquiry. As such, they moved her to the closest secure facility where she could be treated which is in Bethesda, Maryland.”

“Fine, then why the hell do I need to go to Metropolis afterwards then?” He scowled.

“That’s something you’ll have to discuss with Mr. Fox and Ms. Wells,” Alfred told him, seemingly unaffected by his employer’s demanding tone.

“I don’t have time for this crap,” he said, snatching up his tablet and bringing up his email. “Call Wells and tell her I’ll go to DC but Lucius can handle the meeting in Metropolis on his own. I have better things to do than sit around a conference table listening to a bunch of lawyers bitch and whine about how the sky is falling. I want to get this done and be on the plane back to Gotham as soon as the press conference breaks up.”

“Very good, sir. And did you want me to fix you something now or would you prefer to get something when you land in Washington?”

Wayne checked his watch and scowled, “The flight from here to DC is less than two hours. I’ll just have a sandwich then catch something at the hotel later. Felicity should also have some sort of homemade soup she made for our lunch in there as well.”

Oliver felt his anger boil to the surface and it was all he could do not to curl his hand into a fist and deck Wayne again. Just the fact that they engaged in something as domestic as having a home cooked meal in the kitchen bothered him almost as much as walking into what was obviously his bedroom and seeing her things there did earlier. Actually, truth be told, it bothered him more. Sex was easy for guys like him and Wayne, it didn’t necessarily mean anything, but intimacy was something else entirely.

Oblivious to the blow he had just successfully landed, Wayne continued to scowl at his tablet as Alfred dug through the refrigerator. He pulled out a large container of soup and peered inside. “Oh good,” the elderly man said as he lifted the lid. “Would you care for anything, Mr. Queen?”

“Just coffee,” he told him tersely. The old man just nodded, choosing to either ignore his obvious bad temper or just so used to Wayne’s little bitch fits that he no longer noticed them in others anymore.
“Can we get back to the matter at hand or are you so caught up in emails and food that you can’t remember why we’re here in the first place?”

That had Wayne putting down the tablet and giving him a hard look, “Believe me when I say that I haven’t forgotten a goddamn thing, Queen.”

“Good, then maybe you can finish telling me this theory of yours so you can get on your plane and I can save Felicity,” he shot back.

Wayne turned toward him, a dangerous look on his face, “Listen to me you son of a--!”

“Master Bruce!” Alfred cut in sharply. As soon as Wayne turned his focus to the other man, the butler began to speak, “I believe you were about to answer my inquiry as to why you believe someone would hire a hitman to dispose of Miss Felicity if Mr. Queen was the intended target?”

Wayne turned to him once again, his eyes burning, “I don’t know; my best guess is that someone wanted to weaken you professionally or personally before coming after you directly. Felicity was both your EA and your Mission Tech; losing her would weaken you on both counts.”

“The only person around that time who would have a motive to do that would be Slade and if he wanted to take out Felicity he wouldn’t have used an intermediary,” Oliver told him then paused as something else Slade said to Felicity occurred to him. “Slade said he had an associate, a female companion who was apparently jealous of the feelings that he’d been harboring towards Felicity. He said she wanted to have her killed but he wouldn’t allow it so she betrayed him and that he intended to go after her once he got Felicity away from me.”

“And you’re just now telling me this?” Wayne thundered.

“To be fair, I was on the verge of losing consciousness and bleeding out at the time so excuse me if I didn’t connect the dots,” he told him with more than a hint of anger of his own. “Besides, up until recently I was convinced someone else was responsible for the contract but that theory didn’t pan out.”

“Could this female associate have been Isabel Rochev?” He asked in an answering growl.

“If it was Isabel then she wouldn’t have cancelled the hit. Also, why recruit Felicity if she planned on killing her?”

The microwave dinged and Alfred took out the soup to set it and a sandwich in front of Wayne. As soon as the smell of the food hit his nose, Oliver felt his stomach clench. Ever since Felicity left he hadn’t been eating or sleeping much; he wouldn’t have eaten anything at all if Dig and Roy weren’t there to shove a protein bar in his hands every once in a while. Actually, he couldn’t remember when he’d even had that much but something about being in Felicity’s place, even if it was mostly empty, suddenly brought his appetite back.

Alfred must have noticed because he asked, “Are you sure you wouldn’t care for something, Mr. Queen? I have to fix a tray for Master Luke anyway.”

“Fine, okay; I’ll have whatever you fixed Wayne, I guess. Thank you,” Oliver said blowing out a frustrated breath. “We’re missing something; there’s something there, I just can’t put my finger on it!”

“Go over what it is Slade told you about this associate of his,” Wayne said taking a bite of his sandwich.
“I already told you everything; all he said was that she was his companion and that she wanted Felicity killed but he wouldn’t allow it. He said—” His mouth tightened in remembrance of words that still haunted his nightmares, “He said a lot of stuff about how he intended to make ‘Ivo’s daughter’ his new ‘companion’ and that he—” He stopped, unable to say anything else.

It had almost killed him when he realized that bastard had been in Felicity’s house. For months he’d had nightmares about what could have happened and he knew she did as well. They’d never spoken about it but he knew. He knew from the dark circles under her eyes and the marked increase in her caffeine intake.

He knew when Thea told him a few weeks after he got out of the hospital that she never slept and that she started keeping a shotgun under her bed but, as usual, he was too much of a damn coward to do anything about it.

“Ollie, can we talk?”

He looked up from his tablet as he shifted uncomfortably on the couch, “Hey Thea; yeah, come in.” He went to make room on the end of the sofa but she waved him off and sat on the coffee table in front of him instead.

“Where’s Laurel?” She asked, her tone taking on a note of acidity as she looked around their apartment.

After his mother’s murder he and Thea, by mutual agreement, decided to move into their father’s old penthouse in the Marchioness instead. It had officially been his pied-à-terre for when he had to work late but everyone knew it was where he conducted most of his affairs. As distasteful as it seemed at first to make this their new home, Thea had pointed out that it was just sitting there empty and they might as well put it to good use. Since Laurel had taken charge of his care though, Thea was rarely home anymore; something he had dismissed as merely her need to stay close to Roy but now he had to wonder.

“Laurel’s out buying groceries since Raisa’s visiting her sister. What’s going on with you two anyway?”

“God, you are an idiot,” she said with a scowl. “You really don’t see it, do you?”

He frowned, “See what?”

She rolled her eyes in exasperation, “That she’s practically got ‘Property of Laurel’ stamped on your forehead and has been snarling at everyone who so much as comes near you like a pit-bull guarding her favorite chew toy!”

“She’s just been through a lot, Speedy,” he said with a grimace. “This whole thing has been hard on her.”

“Like it hasn’t been hard on the rest of us?” She demanded.

“Is that why you’ve been staying someplace else; Laurel?” He asked, looking at her carefully. It was obvious that something had her upset. “Do you…do you need me to ask her to move out, because this is your home too, you know.”

“No,” she said, not meeting his eyes.
“Thea, listen,” he moved so he could place his hand on his sister’s knee to get her attention. “If you want, I can talk to her; ask her to tone it down some. I almost lost you once and, as much as I appreciate having Laurel here helping us out, I don’t want you to ever think you’re not welcome here.”

“I’m not moving out,” she told him quietly.

“Okay, good,” he told her. His eyes focused on her expression, “What is it then; what’s wrong?” She seemed to struggle so he asked, “Is it Roy? Did something happen with you two?”

“No,” she told him, heaving a frustrated sigh. “It’s not Roy, it’s Felicity.”

His brow furrowed in confusion, “Something happened between you and Felicity?”

“No, nothing like that,” she licked her lips. “I’ve been staying at her place since the thing with Slade…”

He frowned, “I thought you were staying with Sin at Roy’s place.”

She shook her head, “No; I was going to but I didn’t want to leave Felicity alone. Not since…”

He felt his jaw tighten as he tried to rein in his emotions, “Since what exactly? What did she tell you?”

“Nothing; that’s the problem,” she told him in a near whisper. “She won’t talk about what happened to you guys.”

He rubbed his hand over his mouth and shut his eyes, allowing the memories to wash over and through him, “Yeah, well, give her time, Speedy. Until she’s ready though, you need to leave it be; don’t push her.”

“The thing is, I think…” she stopped, her eyes dropping to the floor nervously once more.

He looked at her sharply, “What?”

“You know how she only has the one bedroom?”

“Actually, no; I’ve never been to her place.”

“Really?” She said in surprise.

“Yeah, really,” he said with a scowl.

“Huh,” she said, cocking her head to the side. “I always thought she was lying about that.”

“About what?” He asked feeling a sting of irritation.

She shrugged, “I asked her if you guys had ever done the nasty and she said that you guys weren’t like that.”

“Damn it, Thea,” he scowled.

“Never mind, listen,” she said waving him off. “Anyway, she’s been letting me stay in her room since it’s the only bed and--”

He gave her a disapproving look, “Wait, you kicked Felicity out of her own bed? Why didn’t you
just sleep on the couch?”

“That’s not how girls do things,” she said rolling her eyes at him.

“What do you mean that’s not how girls do things?” He asked her. “Sara slept on her couch all the time.”

“No, she didn’t,” she snorted.

“Yes, she did; I heard her complain about the pullout couch and how drafty her old house was all the time.”

“At first maybe, but after that she just slept in the same bed as Felicity.” she paused, “Unless it was allergy season and then she slept on the couch because, wow. When Blondie starts sawing logs she sounds like a bear with a head cold, especially if the pollen count is up or she’s had one too many shots of tequila.”

“Wait, Sara and Felicity slept together?” he asked, his brow furrowed in consternation. “When the hell was this?”

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” she said giving him a disgusted look. “Contrary to those pornos you used to watch on your laptop, girls can sleep in the same bed without having sexy pillow fights in high heels and underwear! Or do you think I’m having sex with her, too?”

Oliver’s mouth fell open and he almost said something but thought better of it. The images that sentence conjured up however would haunt him for years to come. He shuddered, suddenly understanding what Roy meant when Thea or Felicity would say something particularly disturbing then complain that it was too bad ‘brain bleach’ didn’t really exist.

“And can I finish what I was saying?” She asked, pinning him with another glare.

“Please,” he said rubbing his temples as best he could given the fact that his arm was in a brace.

“Anyway, Felicity hasn’t been sleeping. At first I figured that she was just crashing on the couch since she’s been working so late. I thought she didn’t want to risk waking me up but then I started noticing how pale and drawn she’s been getting and that she’s started to lose weight.”

“Is she okay?” He asked, snapping out of it. “Wait, why is she working late?” He asked her. “Is Walter keeping her at QC for some reason I don’t know about?”

“Walter’s not at QC,” she told him. “Well, he is, but only for meetings so since you’re out on sick leave and that Isabel woman is out of the country, Felicity has been running everything.”

“She didn’t tell me that,” he said with a frown.

“How would you know?” Thea said, her eyes flashing with irritation. “You’ve been out of the hospital for nearly three weeks now and Laurel won’t even let Felicity come see you much less talk to you on the phone.”

“That’s not true,” he said, “I’ve talked with her plus she’s been sending me regular email updates. If there was a problem she could have told me.”

“First off, it is true,” she told him flatly. “I know for a fact Felicity tried to see you at the hospital a few times and Laurel basically kicked her out and told the nurses not to let her back in because it might upset you.”
“Laurel did what?” He growled. “Why the hell didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Why do you think she stopped coming around?” Thea asked him. “Of course, I didn’t know about it either until I overheard her talking to Dig about it. I was going to go over to Laurel and rip her hair out but Felicity wouldn’t let me. I did confront her later though and I told her that if she ever pulled that shit again, she’d be the one getting kicked out.”

“Is that why you’ve been avoiding Laurel?” He asked her.

“Among other things,” she told him. “Then there’s the fact that every time Felicity tries to call your cell, it gets sent to voicemail so she finally just gave up. She thinks you don’t want to talk to her or that you’re pissed or something.”

“That’s not true,” he told her. He picked up his cell and scrolled through the calls before handing it to his sister, “Look; no calls from Felicity and no voicemails.”

She arched her eyebrow and gave him a longsuffering look like he was being an idiot, “It’s called ‘delete’, dumb ass.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” he told her. “Laurel wouldn’t do that; she knows Felicity is my eyes and ears at QC. Now, I’ll admit that she overstepped big time at the hospital, and I fully intend to tell her that, but she wasn’t herself; none of us were. She probably thought that once I saw Felicity that I’d be tempted to talk about stuff to do with the office or Arrow business, that’s all. Tell you the truth, she was probably right; the first thing I did when I woke up is ask her to hand me my phone so I could talk to Trevor and then I asked her to bring me a laptop so I could catch up on work.”

She gave him a disgusted look, “How you can be this smart and yet so stupid is beyond me,” she muttered. “Fine, whatever; anyway, like I was saying, Felicity’s handling work fine. Tell you the truth, she’s probably better at being CEO than you are; that’s not the problem.”

“Thanks for that,” he said dryly. “What is the problem then?”

“The other day I came home earlier than I usually do and I went into the bedroom to change. I wasn’t expecting to see Felicity there—”

“Well, it is her place, Speedy,” he said drolly.

“I know that, dip shit; now will you please shut the hell up already?” She gave him one last warning look before continuing, “I walked in the room and Felicity is half under the bed installing something under the bed frame. When I asked her what she was doing she jumped and laughed it off saying that the frame was squeaking and she was installing some new nuts and bolts to see if that would fix the problem.” She bit her lip and shook her head slightly, “I knew she was lying but I played it off and went in the bathroom to take a shower instead.”

He narrowed his eyes in confusion, “How did you know she was lying?”

“She was surrounded by bags from the sporting goods store,” she told him. “As far as I know they don’t sell hardware for bed frames there. I pretended not to notice and later when I asked her she said she bought us a couple of new yoga mats and work out gear since I left mine here and hers was falling apart.”

“And did she buy the mats?”

“Yeah, but that’s not the point!” She said with a scowl.
He sighed, “Fine, so what is it you *think* she was doing?”

“At first I didn’t know,” she told him with a hint of irritation. “It wasn’t until the next day that I was able to peek under her side of the bed that I found it.” She shifted uncomfortably, “Well, first I dug around in the trash for the receipt from the sporting goods store and then I found it.”

“Found what?”

“She, um, bought this metal box thing that she hid under her side of the bed.”

He looked at her in confusion, “A metal box thing?”

“It’s called a ‘Fast Box’ according to the receipt,” she told him. “It’s some kind of gun safe thing and she bought a shotgun to go inside it. Not only that but when I went over there yesterday I found the landlord standing on the porch supervising as these workmen were swarming the place. He handed me a new set of keys and said Felicity asked if he could keep an eye out while she was in the office. They were replacing all of the windows with ones that had built in bars and she had them put in new doors that just look like wood but were made of reinforced steel. He said she didn’t even ask to be compensated for it even though her lease says that, as long as it’s approved by the owner, she can negotiate to have any home improvements that increase the property value taken off her rent. The old guy was really ticked off on her behalf, too. Apparently the guy who inherited the property hasn’t done crap to maintain the homes in the neighborhood and he tried to talk her into pushing for it but she told him that as long as the owners were cool then she didn’t need to be reimbursed. She told him that it wasn’t worth it and that she was willing to take it as a write-off but he spent twenty minutes ranting to me about how someone like Felicity who pays her rent months in advance shouldn’t let herself be taken advantage of. He made me promise to speak to her and later, when she got home, I tried, but she just said that as long as I was there she wanted to make sure we were safe and not to worry about it. Then, almost as soon as the words were out of her mouth, she broke out her tools only to wind up spending half the night installing surveillance cameras and putting in keypads like the one you guys have on the door to the Lair.”

He felt his entire body tense but reined it in so he could appear seemingly unconcerned as he addressed his sister, “Thea, it’s probably like she said; she just wants to keep you safe.”

“But Slade’s dead,” she said with a frown. “Plus, when she does sleep, she’s been having nightmares. Bad ones.” She bit her lip, “You know, like the kind you had when you first got home. She fell asleep at her desk the other day and woke up screaming about,” her voice dropped to a confidential level, “*him*.”

He felt his heart clench in his chest and grimaced, “Yeah, well, I imagine we’ve all had a few of those since getting back,” he said quietly then cleared his throat. “Speedy, we all went through a lot; Felicity included. You remember how you were after mom died, right? You didn’t want to talk about it either. You handled it by getting angry instead; Felicity handles her stress by going overboard with security. Just leave her be and let her do her thing.”

“Young, but…” she bit her lip again, “It’s not just bad dreams, y’know? I’m getting really worried about her. Maybe…maybe you should talk to her. She won’t talk to me but maybe she’ll talk to you?”

He shifted uncomfortably on the couch again, “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” She asked him.

He forced a smile onto his face, “Look, I’ve known Felicity for over three years now and she’ll talk
when she’s ready; trust me. In fact, you’ll be lucky if she ever stops talking once she gets going.” He
waited until Thea offered him a crooked smile before continuing, “In the meantime, here’s what I
think: Felicity takes your safety very seriously especially after the thing with Merlyn and Slade. You
staying there probably has her worried because she lives near the Glades, that’s all. She just wants to
make sure both of you are in a secure location. You’ve seen the security she has on the Lair; with the
rest of us out of commission that leaves her holding the ball in case something happens.”

Thea frowned, “So what are you saying? That I should move out of her place? You think that’s why
she hasn’t been sleeping; because I’m there?”

Later, when he thought about this moment, it would always leave a sour feeling in the pit of his
stomach. Why he said it he couldn’t say. Maybe it was because he understood what Felicity was
going through and knew how hard it was to deal with it in front of an audience. Maybe he said it
because Thea was pulling away because of Laurel and he didn’t want to risk losing her again.
Maybe he was telling the truth and Felicity really was just working through some issues.

Maybe it was all of those things but mainly it was because he knew that any other answer he gave
would force him into a situation where he’d have to talk to her and he just wasn’t ready to deal with
his feelings yet. He was still so damn angry at her; so goddamn livid about what she tried to do to
herself and at what she had almost made him a witness to. The logical part of his brain knew that she
was trying to save them but the hurt animal part of him only knew that he had already lost Shado and
his mother to Slade; he couldn’t lose her as well. He was angry because she knew that and did it
anyway. She knowingly would have left him behind to carry that guilt as if he didn’t already have
enough as it was and it just wasn’t fair. He wanted to rail and rant at her for that but, instead, he
stayed silent.

Yes, it was cruel; yes, he was being an asshole of the highest order, but he just wasn’t ready to let
that pain and anger go yet.

“I think you should come home,” he told her, even though he knew the hurt he was causing his sister
as he said it. “Give Felicity a chance to breathe. I know she likes you a lot, Speedy, and that you
guys are friends, but she needs time to work this out on her own and she can’t do that if you’re
there.” At the wounded look in his sister’s eyes he added, “Besides, I’m getting a little sick of Laurel
myself and I was hoping that if you were here I might be able to convince her to go back to her
place, y’know?”

Thea’s eyes still held a hint of heartache but she smiled anyway, “Can I be there when you tell her to
pack her shit and get out?”

“Funny,” he said wryly. “Now why don’t you play nursemaid and get me a water from the fridge?”

“Bullshit on that,” she told him looking pointedly at the crutches beside him. “Do it yourself, gimpy.”

“You’re all heart, Thea,” he said dryly, reaching for them and levering himself off the couch.

“So I’ve been told,” she said, snatching a magazine off the table and plopping down onto his now
vacated spot on the couch.

He should have manned up and gone to her then but he didn’t. Maybe if he had…

“He what?” Wayne demanded, snapping him out of his reverie. The other man was glaring at him
with the same intensity he used under the cowl; a blood curdling expression of raw anger that
undoubtedly worked on most of the people who were unlucky enough to be caught in his sights.

Luckily Oliver wasn’t ‘most people’. He failed her once when he dodged that particular conversation; he wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. He certainly wasn’t going to lose the opportunity to make things right with her by handing that information over to Wayne instead. No, the other man might have given her the illusion of everything she ever wanted but he knew her better than Wayne ever could. It was obvious that Wayne only knew the girl she used to be; Oliver however, knew the woman she’d become. He also knew exactly how she’d respond when he let down his walls and bared his soul to her. Yes, it was manipulative as hell but all’s fair in love and war and he was playing for keeps.

Ignoring the question he barreled on, “Felicity told him that Ivo wasn’t her father and they got into an argument. Actually she did most of the arguing, he just kept telling her that she was wrong, that the intel came from some high end information broker.”

“Did he give her a name?”

“No,” he told him, nodding in thanks as Alfred set another bowl and plate in front of him. He took a bite of his sandwich before speaking again, “But when she brought up Ducard he looked like he saw a ghost.”

“What do you mean?” Wayne asked, picking up his spoon and taking a bite of his soup.

“I’m going downstairs to relieve Master Luke and to bring him something to eat,” Alfred told them.

Wayne waved him on, “You were saying?”

“Frankly he looked scared shitless,” he told him honestly. “He recognized the name instantly and said that he’d have to get in contact with him and smooth things over before he went through with his plans. He said that this guy was some sort of devil or ghost and that he’d have to proceed carefully or risk making an enemy out of him.” He shook his head, “Personally I just thought he was having some kind of hallucination or talking crazy but now I have to wonder if I didn’t miss something.” He picked up his spoon and began eating the hearty bowl of soup the butler had placed in front of him.

“Ducard has a pretty tough rep among other mercs and assassins but I don’t know why his name would elicit that strong of a reaction from a man like Deathstroke,” Wayne said as he chewed his sandwich slowly.

Oliver got up to get a water from the fridge, “You want one?”

“Yeah,” he said catching it midair.

“Is there any way you could contact this guy and check it out; see if he knows what the hell is going on?” He asked as he opened the water in his hand and took a drink before sitting back down at the counter.

“He’s not that easy to track down but I’ll have Barbara work on it, plus an ex of mine is based in Paris,” he paused to take another drink. “She’s an investigative journalist with a lot of underworld connections. She might be able to find out something.”

“An ex, huh?” He said with a snort as he sat back down and started on his soup again.

“What of it?” Wayne asked him with a jaundiced eye.
“Nothing,” Oliver said, hiding his smirk behind another bite of sandwich. “Okay, so what about HIVE?”

He glared at him silently for a moment before speaking, “According to my people on the inside, this Miranda Tate person has been investigating them but they don’t have any evidence to indicate she’s telling the truth. Not only that but strange things have been going on over there which have been raising more than a few red flags. I find it interesting that Isabel Rochev is connected both to Orbital and that she’s the one who negotiated the deal with LexCorp and Sebastien Mallory on behalf of your company before the Miller thing broke wide open.”

“So do you think Isabel is connected to HIVE or do you think Mallory is?” He asked.

“Maybe, or maybe they both are;” Wayne said broodingly. “It could even be Luthor himself. God knows his hands aren’t exactly clean; this sort of thing is right up his alley.”

“Okay, so what do we have so far? On one hand we have the League who are planning something but we don’t know what; all we know is that it probably has to do with the Mirakuru and these Lazarus Pools--”

“Pits,” Wayne corrected him.

“Pools, Pits, whatever the hell they’re called. Then we have the contract on Felicity that may or may not have been arranged by Slade’s mysterious companion, whoever the hell that is.”

“It’s a good theory,” Wayne said with a frown. “It would explain why it was dropped before he made his move, especially if he was fixating on Felicity.” He tented his fingers together as he rested his elbows on the table in deep contemplation. “I had Alfred look into this Miranda Tate woman but he hasn’t found much; just that she’s the CEO of Stellmoor and uses her company’s resources to fund this Anti-Trafficking Foundation that we now know is a front for Orbital.”

“You think she could be Slade’s companion?” He asked, taking another bite of his sandwich.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Seems a bit farfetched but who knows?” He exhaled in frustration, “Again though, Isabel Rochev is the common link. She’s connected to Stellmoor, Orbital, your company, LuthorCorp, and she had a personal vendetta against Felicity.” He stopped, “But why draw me into this? Why bring both of our teams together? We’re missing something.”

“We’re missing a lot of things,” Oliver said ruefully.

“According to Katana, Orbital is particularly interested in going after organized crime and League operations. You and I both have a history with the League; maybe that’s it.”

“How so?” Oliver asked.

“Whoever these people are they seem to have intimate knowledge of both of our missions,” Wayne said carefully. “Ra’s thinks I play some sort of role in this prophesy of his--”

Oliver arched an eyebrow in the other man’s direction, “Prophesy? Seriously?”

He grimaced, “Like I said, he considers himself a mystic of sorts. He has this prophesy he lives by which is actually a delusion caused by his overuse of the Pits. He believes one of his daughters is destined to give birth to his true heir and that his greatest and most worthy adversary will be the one to father the child. Up until now, he thought that enemy was me. He even saved my life because he was afraid that if I died the prophesy wouldn’t come to pass.”
“Wait, so what are you trying to say?” He asked, narrowing his eyes in confusion. “You think that because I was on Lian Yu and helped take out the operation he had there that I’m this prophesized enemy of his?”

“It makes sense—in as much as something as farfetched as a prophesy can make sense,” he said with a shrug. “He sent in his people to protect your city for a reason and then there’s the Mirakuru and these herbs of yours that might be related to the Lazarus Pits. Knowing Ra’s, he probably sees your acceptance of those things as some sort of sign.”

“So you think Orbital is drawing us and our teams in to, what? Draw out Ra’s?” He asked skeptically.

“I don’t know,” Wayne said brusquely. “Maybe, maybe not. He disappeared from sight a couple of years back and hasn’t been seen since. Personally I’m not even convinced he’s still alive but nothing would surprise me about that man. He was dying the last time I saw him and he could no longer use the Pits so who knows? Maybe they think that our teaming up will draw him out?”

Oliver frowned as he went over everything in his head again. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest then spoke, “Okay, fuck it, let’s say you’re right; I know I’ve seen bad guys pull some pretty goddamn convoluted plans out of their asses before so, fine. If Orbital wants us drawn into this to bring Ra’s out of hiding then why not just ask? Why go through all of this bullshit?”

“Maybe they thought we’d turn them down?” The other man offered. “If Rochev had come to you and admitted she was part of this Orbital Organization—?”

“I’d have tossed her out on her ass,” he said with a sigh.

“I would have as well,” Wayne admitted.

“I don’t trust her,” Oliver told him. “There’s no way this group is legit. Something about this whole thing makes my skin crawl and I’m not buying their corporate vigilante line of bullshit for a second.”

“Agreed,” Wayne told him. “Something’s off, plus I still can’t figure out the whole HIVE connection.”

“Maybe this Lois Lane can tell you something?” Oliver suggested.

“From a coma?” He said dryly.

“Okay, maybe her editor can or Mallory.” He glanced up at Wayne, “You need to go to Metropolis.”

The other man gave him a hard look, “I’m sure you’d like that but there’s no way in hell that’s happening.”

“Mallory is in Metropolis. The only way to get answers is if the Bat confronts him and scares them out of him,” Oliver said reasonably. “Bruce Wayne has a legitimate reason for being in Metropolis, ergo…” He paused, arching an eyebrow in his direction, “Of course, if you don’t think you can handle that the Arrow could make the trip instead.”

“I’m not that stupid, Queen. You want to go to Metropolis then go,” he told him. “Take your little bow and arrow and treat that little bastard like a pincushion for all I care, but I’m not leaving Felicity in the cold while all this is going on any longer than I have to.”

“Yeah, okay, or maybe you’re just worried that the whole ‘marriage and family’ line of bullshit you
tried handing Felicity isn’t working out for you after all? Maybe keeping her here in Gotham isn’t as much of a sure thing as you’d like everyone to believe?” He smirked at him, “What’s the matter, Wayne? Afraid that your fiancée might actually prefer me over you?” He picked up his sandwich and took another bite, tilting his head as if giving the matter some thought, “Eh, you might have a point. Yeah, you probably shouldn’t leave town after all. One look at me and she’ll be packing her bags and jumping right into my—”

“Keep trying to goad me, Queen,” he shot back with a dark look. “It just proves how big of an idiot you are.”

“Fine,” he shrugged, “I’ll go. You handle buying a bouquet for the comatose reporter and concentrate on looking pretty for your little press conference; in the meantime I’ll be in Metropolis getting to the bottom of things.”

“And how are you going to explain your presence there?” Wayne said with a sneer.

“If it comes up, I’ll figure it out then,” he told him insouciantly.

The other man shook his head and made a disgusted noise, “So you’re just going to waltz in there and play it by ear, risking everything and possibly blowing your cover and our investigation wide open?”

“Pretty much,” Oliver told him flatly.

He shifted in his chair and glowered at him, “Fine, I’ll go to Metropolis.”

“In that case I’d better go relieve your guy,” Oliver said casually as he got up from his chair and placed his empty plate and bowl in the sink.

“You’re not fooling me, Queen,” Wayne said, a dangerous glint in his eye. “I know exactly what that little act you were putting on just now was about and, I’m telling you right now, if you want to waste your time then go right ahead; I’m not worried. I know for a fact that there’s no way in hell Felicity would ever even consider going back to Starling with you. You know how I know?”

“I don’t know, Wayne; why don’t you enlighten me,” he said as he casually leaned against the counter.

“I asked her,” he told him with a glint of satisfaction. “Right before I proposed she told me that she was over you.”

“That so?” He said in a bored tone.

He gave him a dangerous smile, “Yeah, that’s so. She’s marrying me, Queen; not you. Whatever she thought she felt for you ended the second she agreed to be my wife.”

He shot him a confident grin, “We’ll see, Wayne; we’ll see. In the meantime though, enjoy your trip.”

“Oh, I intend to,” he said with an ice-cold smile that matched his own.

Felicity went to the office and knocked on the door hesitantly. A moment later the door opened revealing Isabel who had apparently changed following her call with Miranda.
And, just as she predicted, she really was into leather.

Unable to stop herself she took it *all* in. Label whore that she was thanks to the teachings of her sister, she immediately recognized the studded black leather peplum jacket and skirt as Alexander McQueen. In true McQueen style it was a play on traditional fine tailoring but with unexpected materials. Had the suit been done in silk or wool it would have seemed both tame and professional even with the low neckline and high slit in the front that ran from the knee length hemline to mid-thigh. However the fine black lambskin and contrasting gold studs that followed the stitching made it seem less like normal office wear and more like something Satan’s wife might wear to a Hell’s Angels board meeting. She looked down and noted the spiked black platform Louboutins that had to be at least five or six inches high.

In a word she looked...

...dangerous.

Damn, way to accessorize.

Her gaze traveled back upwards to see that disconcerting glint in the other woman’s eye that never failed to make her want to cover up her girly bits with both hands and hide in the closet until the threat had passed.

“Ready for dinner?” She asked with a seductive lilt to her tone.

Oh boy. Yep, she was definitely in over her head…

She swallowed, “Looking forward to it.”
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Felicity slipped her coat off her shoulders and handed it and her scarf to the attendant, pretending not to notice the look of open appreciation Isabel was casting over her exposed flesh. The cream colored Gucci jumpsuit draped her form in loose silken folds while the open halter neck of the top plunged between her breasts while leaving her back and arms bare. The décolletage, while certainly provocative as the design would not allow for a foundation garment to be worn underneath, was still tasteful. She accessorized it with the same jewelry she had worn earlier, along with her gold Jimmy Choo sling backs, and a simple matching clutch.

She thought long and hard about wearing the much warmer Armani she had pulled out of her closet earlier, but since she was only exposed to the weather for just the few short strides it took to walk from Isabel’s car to the entrance of the restaurant, she figured it would be fine. In fact, the interior of the restaurant itself was quite warm; surprisingly warm in fact. Most places tended to stay on the cool side but someone had cranked the heat up to the point that she was grateful she hadn’t worn the long sleeved pantsuit after all.
“Have you ever been to Nereid before?” Isabel asked her, her fingers brushing softly down her back and causing her to start slightly as the hostess led them inside.

“Um no, no I haven’t.” Felicity said, looking around the restaurant carefully. The first thing she noticed was that there were very few men in the place. The second thing she noticed was that most of the women appeared to be very much together. “Is this a girl bar? I thought we were having dinner first?”

Their hostess turned to them with a polite smile, “The first floor is the restaurant but our bar is upstairs.” She led them to a shadowy area of the restaurant, though truthfully, the entire place was rather dimly lit, and seated them at a booth that was partitioned off from the other diners. She imagined Isabel had reserved it when she called earlier in order to assure them of more privacy, but looking around she could see it was hardly necessary. There weren’t many diners in the restaurant that evening and it was very quiet, even for a Tuesday evening, with only the faint sounds of Nina Simone echoing around them.

Instead of traditional bench seats and tables, each booth consisted of two Victorian style ‘fainting couches’ in rich crimson velvet that bracketed a back-lit glass and wood table. As she slid into her seat, she watched as Isabel leaned back into the chaise, her legs crossed at the ankles as she lay lengthwise along the couch in an almost feline manner. She glanced around and noticed that the other patrons, what few she could see from where they were sitting, had chosen to lie back on the couches as well so she followed suit. Easing back against the plush upholstery she couldn’t help but sigh in relief despite the situation. The warmth of the restaurant combined with the sinfully soft seating and low lights had her seriously thinking about skipping dinner and just taking a nap instead.

“This is nice,” she said looking around. “Different.”

The hostess nodded, “The owners wanted to create a safe place and warm atmosphere where members of the community could enjoy themselves while remaining accessible to everyone. It really helped fill a void. A lot of our regulars like bringing their clients here for power lunches; especially after The Gothamite did a review that called Nereid ‘Lesbian Implied Fine Dining at its Best’. After that our business went through the roof.”

Felicity looked around noting the exposed brick and artsy black and white posters of gay icons lining the walls like Madonna, Kate Moennig, and the infamous Vanity Fair photo of Cindy Crawford shaving and straddling a very happy looking k.d.lang. “Looks a bit more than just implied,” she snorted.

“Yeah, well, most of our patrons are lesbians but we also get a lot of straight people in here because we keep it family-friendly with good food so no one feels intimidated. You guys are lucky you got here on a slow night. Like I said, we’re usually packed because of the theatre crowd but the weather has slowed things down a bit.”

“Well, this is great. If the food is as good as the atmosphere I’m going to have to start bringing my friends here as well.” She looked at her curiously, “You said the bar was upstairs? So there’s dancing and stuff?”

She nodded, “We have a DJ on the weekends and theme nights on Thursdays but it’s pretty quiet most weeknights. It’s still usually pretty full but not so loud you have to shout to hear each other. Like I said, sometimes you just want to keep things mellow and relaxed so, if you’re interested, you might want to head upstairs after dinner to check it out.”

“Did you want to go dancing?” Felicity asked, turning to Isabel hopefully.
“I think we could manage that,” Isabel said with a slight upturn of her lips.

“Thanks, we’ll do that,” Felicity told her brightly.

“No problem,” she told her warmly. She waved over a busboy with some ice water for their glasses, “I’m Andrea, let me know if you need anything else and your server will be with you shortly.”

After the hostess handed them their menus and left, Felicity pointed to an odd looking glass decanter on the table, “What is that?” It was a covered glass globe that was held aloft by a winged figure of a naked woman with small spouts branching off from either side. It looked a bit like a lamp almost but it was obvious that it was meant to contain some sort of liquid.

Isabel looked at her in amusement, “What do you suppose it is?”

Felicity frowned, suddenly wondering if she was about to blow her cover. For all she knew the odd glass and pewter thingamajig was some sort of weird lesbian dining accessory she’d never heard of. “Um, well, it’s not a lamp,” she looked at it again and touched the spigots tentatively. “Some kind of…drink dispenser?”

Her smile broadened slightly, “It’s an absinthe fountain; I take it you’ve never tried it?”

“No,” she flushed.

Isabel’s eyes lit up again and she gently took Felicity’s menu from her hands, “Do you trust me?”

“Depends on what you’re planning on doing to me,” she said without thinking then flushed again and pressed her lips together with a wince. “Sorry, no brain to mouth filter…”

To her surprise, Isabel offered her a low, husky laugh, “For now, I intend to feed you. As for what happens after that, we’ll just have to wait and see.” The other woman looked at her through hooded eyes causing her nerves to further unravel, “Do you have any dietary restrictions?” Before Felicity could answer the question, she added, “Other than your nut allergy, of course.”

“You know about--?” She stopped and centered herself, “It’s in my file, right.” Isabel offered her another amused glance, “Um, no; whatever you order is fine.”

“Excellent,” she smiled again, just a disconcerting upturn of the corners of her lips but her relaxed posture and body language was such a departure from the Isabel she knew that she found herself fighting the urge to fidget.

At that moment their server came around, “Good evening, ladies, my name is Toni and I’ll be your server; would you care to hear our specials tonight?”

“No need,” Isabel said, putting down the menus. “We’ll start with two glasses of Vieux Pontarlier, then the Hibiscus Champagne with the caviar tasting.”

“The three, six, or eight course menu?”

Isabel turned to her, “How hungry are you?”

“Honestly? Pretty darn hungry,” Felicity told her. Yeah, if ever there was a time to stress eat…

Isabel turned to their server, “The eight course along with the cutting board.”

The woman nodded and smiled at them warmly, “I’ll be right out with your drinks.”
After their server left, Isabel turned to her, that disconcerting half smile playing around her lips once more. She waited until Felicity picked up her glass to drink then asked, “So, how many lovers have you had?”

She put down her water and coughed into her napkin, eyes watering slightly, “I’m sorry?”

“How many lovers?” She repeated, her expression as calm and expressionless as if she were merely discussing the weather.

“Um,” she cleared her throat again. “Why do you ask?”

She shrugged delicately, “Winston Churchill once said that the only things worth discussing are religion, politics, and sex. Frankly religion doesn’t interest me, politics bores me, so that only leaves sex.” She looked at her again, that odd light shining from her dark depths, “How many lovers have you had?”

She settled into the chaise uneasily and tried to think of how to answer her. Finally she decided to use the advice Sara had given her at the beginning of her training.

//When you’re working a cover, the fewer lies you tell, the better off you’ll be. The closer to the truth you keep things the less you have to remember as you go because, nine times out of ten, it’s the little details that will get you killed.//

“Two,” she answered, feeling her cheeks burn in spite of herself.

Isabel’s eyebrows rose in mild surprise as she looked her over once more, “Only two? So who was your first if I might ask?” At her hesitation, Isabel tilted her head an looked at her challengingly, “After all, I shared my first time story with you; it’s only fair that you should return the favor. Was it with a man or a woman?” Her eyes watched her expression carefully as she waited for her answer.

A buzz ran over her and a sense of dread crawled down her spine. She was entering into dangerous territory here. She returned Isabel’s look with one of her own, “A man.”

Isabel leaned back into the cushions slightly, a cunning smirk replacing the more sensual one. She’d surprised her with her honesty, that was obvious, which meant she made the right choice. Even though the other woman’s expression gave nothing away, something deep inside of her sensed that Isabel already had the answers to most, if not all, of the questions she was about to ask. “Who?”

“Bruce Wayne,” she answered without hesitation. Again Isabel’s eyes flickered slightly and she decided to turn the tables on her, “But you already knew that.”

Isabel nodded slightly, her smile broadening as if to say, ‘touche’, “From the way you carried yourself during the meeting at QC I was under that impression, yes.” Her eyes met hers steadily once more, “I also got the impression that it wasn’t an amicable parting.”

“It was for him,” she answered honestly. “He got what he wanted out of it.” There was no bitterness to her remark, only weary acceptance. She’d made her peace with Bruce obviously, but that wasn’t something she could afford to share with Isabel. Instead her mind began to construct a narrative that would fit with the character Isabel expected her to play. This time it was Sara’s father whose advice she would follow.

After he’d officially been read-in, she had to go on an undercover assignment. She and Sara had been discussing it over dinner when the Detective offered his two cents:

//The key to going undercover is to establish trust with your mark. Don’t just tell them a story, tell
them the story they’ll want to hear, but not necessarily the one they’ll expect to hear. If you tell it the right way then they’ll accept you because you’re just like them, but you can’t just be a mirror; that’s too obvious. If they like football, then so do you but you like the team they hate so you can bust his balls about it when they win. If they like scotch, then all you drink is bourbon because it tastes better than that overpriced shit he orders. If they like telling dirty jokes, then you’ve got a million of ‘em and they’re all better than the crappy ones he tells. Be their buddy, but don’t try; just be.//

“How so?” Isabel asked her.

Felicity swallowed and licked her lips nervously. She looked away from her, refusing to meet her eyes, “Let’s just say I wasn’t expecting it.” Her eyes cut towards Isabel, “I wasn’t assaulted or anything; I was attracted to him so I was a willing participant, but I certainly didn’t make the first move. His advances came out of nowhere and since I had a crush on him for most of my life I just went along with it. I had no idea of what to expect, it wasn’t planned. I’d never even kissed anyone before but he was in the mood for sex and I just happened to be in the room when it hit. Later he was very clear about the fact that all he wanted was a warm body.” She paused again to take a breath, “I don’t think he was expecting me to be as inexperienced as I was, not that he allowed that to stop him.” She grimaced, “The…well, it didn’t even count as an affair really, and I certainly would hesitate to call us lovers; whatever it was, it began and ended with our one weekend together. The whole thing was very…” she took a moment to think of a word Isabel could appreciate, “perfunctory. He thanked me for relieving the boredom, in those exact words, then he left me money for a cab and told me to lock the door on my way out.” She looked up at Isabel, “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

She didn’t answer her, “And your next experience?”

“Equally unexpected but far more enjoyable, even though it ended on a somewhat sour note,” she told her. Again, it was the truth, and one that seemed to please her as the light again returned to her eyes.

“I’m surprised that your experience with Bruce wasn’t better,” Isabel said slowly. “From what I understand, he’s both very skilled and attentive towards his lovers, not to mention well-endowed.” That pinged her radar and she filed it away for later. “I suppose that if he cared about who he was with, he would be,” she told her. Again she was skirting the line but it was still the truth. Bruce could be very loving and tender when he cared about who he was with. Still, even though she knew he’d understand why she was saying what she was saying, the words coming out of her mouth just felt wrong and she knew her body language reflected that. She loved Bruce and it was hard to paint him as an insensitive brute with a hard-on even if it did serve a greater good. Whether the ends justified the means or not, she didn’t like smearing his reputation or belittling their relationship in this manner. She took a shaky breath, regrouping and choosing to allow her uneasiness to work for her, “I don’t really feel comfortable talking about this. That experience is the reason I left Gotham in the first place. Like I said, he didn’t take me against my will but the sordidness of the entire thing was still rather traumatic. I wouldn’t allow anyone else to touch me for a very long time after that, years in fact, and it’s made me very wary of exposing myself. I’m sure you can understand why.”

“And yet you’re living in his penthouse,” she stated blithely.

“I am, yes,” she’d been prepared for this one. Isabel had sent a tail after her and her address was all over the paperwork she’d filled out for Orbital.

“Why?”

“Lots of reasons,” she told her. “My father is his CEO, the place was empty and he wasn’t using it,
“It’s convenient…”

“Why would a man who treated you like you say Bruce treated you give you the use of a fifty million dollar penthouse? Unless, of course, he expected more than just rent.”

“You really have a bad habit of accusing me of sleeping my way to the top, have you noticed that?” Felicity said with a hint of annoyance. She sat up, leaning her elbows on the table, and looked Isabel directly in the eye with as cool and pointed a stare as she could manage. Yes, she was sleeping with Bruce but she was getting real goddamn tired of being called a whore by this woman. “If you want to know if I’m fucking Bruce to pay the rent, the answer is no. Money isn’t an issue for me, obviously; if I just needed to find a decent place to live I could easily find one that didn’t require me to spread my legs for Bruce Wayne.”

Isabel mimicked her body language, leaning in as well, “But he expects you will eventually, correct? After all, he was obviously interested in pursuing you not that long ago. My question is whether or not you intend to give him what he wants?”

“Do you really want to know why I took the penthouse, Isabel?” She said with a hard look. “I did it because Bruce needed to be punished for the way he treated me. After that meeting, the next time I met him and he tried to push himself on me I took everything he did to me and I threw it right back in his face and when I was done he offered me the moon to make it right.” She offered her a dangerous smile of her own, “He even offered to sign over the deed to the place if I wanted, but all I asked for is a lease.”

“And why would you settle for just a lease?” She asked archly.

“Because money bores me as much as religion and politics bore you. All I needed was a place to stay and my living there reminds Bruce of my place in the universe; that I’m not nearly as convenient a lay as I once was.”

“So it’s a matter of revenge then?” She seemed almost delighted by that.

“Revenge, justice; sometimes getting a simple point across is more effective than a bullet to the brain,” she told her, again with the ring of truth reverberating through her words. “I made Bruce Wayne see me for the woman I am, not the girl I once was, and that I will never be that girl again. It was enough.”

“I don’t know if I believe you or not,” Isabel said with a dangerous smirk. “Bruce Wayne is a man who takes what he wants; how is giving him that on a silver platter revenge or justice? Unless of course you’re lying and your lover sent you to infiltrate our organization so you could report back to him anything he may consider useful?”

Now it was Felicity’s turn to smirk, “And just how much do you know about Bruce Wayne, Isabel?”

“Enough,” she said simply.

“Obviously not,” she allowed her smile to broaden as her eyes grew cold. “Bruce is a warrior, a fighter. Whether on the street, in the boardroom, or in the bedroom, he thrives on conflict and control. He has to have control over his entire world and any deviation from that is met with harsh and immediate retribution. If you come at him then he’ll fight back twice as hard. If you attempt to sneak up on him, he’ll anticipate it and destroy you utterly. Bruce only has one weakness; just one, and unfortunately for him I know it.”

“And that is?”
“Apathy,” she told her using Tim’s words. “Fight him and he’ll fight back, give up and he wins, but show him that you don’t care and that delicate house of cards he’s constructed around himself falls. He can’t handle it when he’s confronted by something he can’t fight and that doesn’t see him as important enough to try. It confuses him, leaves him feeling vulnerable, and ultimately takes from him his precious sense of control. Oh, he wants me in his bed; I’m not going to deny that,” she said with a chuckle. “He thinks he’ll get there eventually but he won’t because the Bruce Wayne I slept with when I was nineteen…” she gave her a slow smile and allowed her eyes to drop to the other woman’s form, “is no longer my type.” She tilted her head slightly, “He’s tried though. He came at me like he was the feudal lord everyone sees him as and demanded I give him his *droit du seigneur*, he tried to be the tender lover and offer me whatever it is he thinks I want, and he managed all that while appearing to be an honorable man for my father, but he’ll never have me in the way he wants me ever again. That’s my revenge; simple, clean, and very satisfying. Plus, I also get a great apartment to boot.”

“And when he gets tired of playing this game of yours?” She asked in low, husky tones.

Her smile brightened, “Why do you think I made him sign a lease?”

Isabel chuckled, her expression far less calculating and aloof than before, adopting a more sultry air instead, “Oh, I was right about you. I only wish I had gotten to know you much, much sooner.” She allowed her gaze to flit over her form, “We could have had so much fun together, you and I.”

“Who says we can’t have that now?” Felicity challenged, taking another sip of her water.

Isabel’s smile faltered slightly, not by much but Felicity caught it nonetheless, “We’ll see.”

Toni, their server, appeared with a large platter on which sat a carafe of very cold ice water, two tulip shaped glasses, a dish of sugar cubes, and two odd looking flat spoons with intricate designs cut into them like slots.

She placed the platter on a tray stand and placed the green bottle of absinthe on the table before setting out their glasses and accoutrements. She unscrewed the small decorative acorn at the top of the globe and poured the ice water inside before moving to pour the absinthe when Isabel stopped her.

“Leave the bottle,” she told her. “I’ll handle things from here.”

The woman nodded, “I’ll be out with the cutting board and your first course in just a moment.”

Isabel unscrewed the top of the liquor bottle and poured some of the green spirits into each of the glasses. “What do you know about absinthe?”

“No much,” she admitted. “Just that people called it ‘the green fairy’ and that it contains some kind of chemical that causes hallucinations.”

“A myth,” she assured her. “Absinthe has no hallucinogenic affects and is merely an infusion of herbs in an alcohol base. What else do you know?”

“Um, I saw a movie where they set it on fire and burned the sugar but since she filled the fountain full of water and I don’t see a lighter, I’m assuming that’s not what’s about to happen.”

Isabel chuckled, “The fire ritual was invented to make very cheap imitation absinthe more palatable. True absinthe is never burned. Smell,” she said, handing her one of the glasses.

“Strong,” she said pulling back slightly. “It smells a little like black licorice but mostly all I smell is
Isabel hummed, “Absinthe is very strong and it’s never meant to be served neat so it’s diluted with ice water using a slow drip. The perfume of the absinthe is released in the louche which is what occurs when the water and oils from the herbal extracts blend together. Do you have a sweet tooth?”

“As much as the next person, I guess,” she admitted.

“We’ll start with one sugar cube then add more the next time if it doesn’t meet with your approval.” She placed the decorative spoon over the top of each glass, followed by one of the large sugar cubes, then placed both glasses under the taps on either side. “The sensuality of absinthe comes from the ritual. Observe.” She opened the taps and a slow drip of ice water flowed over the cubes, gradually melting the sugar. “They call absinthe the green goddess or the green fairy because it is very much like a woman.” She gave her another seductive look, “It takes a subtle touch, it appreciates a slow build and can’t be rushed, and its strength is often overlooked because it’s hidden by the sweetness of the sugar.”

As the glass filled, it became a milky jade and Isabel waited until it was full and the sugar was almost completely melted before turning off the slow drip of water. She placed the glass in front of her and stirred it gently with the spoon. “This is the louche. As I said, we stir it so that the sugar is dissolved and the oils from the herbs blend with the water.” She handed her the glass, “Now smell.”

Felicity put her nose to the glass and inhaled. Although there were traces of alcohol still, she could now smell the herbs. “It smells like licorice but more subtle; anise maybe or fennel? Also,” she inhaled again, “um, mint? And something herbal and slightly grassy that I can’t identify.”

“Wormwood,” she supplied. “You have a wonderful nose,” Isabel told her as she stirred her own drink. “Now try some and see if you like it.”

Felicity took a drink of the liquor at the same time Isabel did and let it wash over her taste buds. The first thing she noticed was that it was strong but not nearly as bitter as she’d expected it to be. She could easily pick out the notes of anise, fennel, as well as other unfamiliar herbs but it wasn’t an unpleasant taste at all. While Felicity rarely drank anything other than the occasional glass of wine, it wasn’t bad.

“Well?” The other woman asked curiously.

“It’s good,” she told her. “I still prefer a good red but I could see trying it again.”

“We’ll have to get you that bottle of wine for the next time then, and perhaps some more absinthe as well,” she told her with a look of less than pure intent.

Felicity blushed despite herself. Damn, how is it that the bad guys have no problem with cutting to the chase, expressing their feelings, and giving good date, while the supposed good guys can’t even stop long enough to have a burger and a decent conversation?

It was enough to make her want to pull her hair out and switch teams.

Not...not switch *teams* teams, just...

...fuck it.

“Maybe we should get through this date first?” She suggested instead.

“Till next time then,” she said, raising her glass. She ran her eyes over her again, “I do believe that I
will enjoy teaching you the art of sensuality, Felicity Smoak.”

“Think so?” Felicity said, her heart thundering in her ears as she tried to fake her way through her embarrassment.

She hummed again, “Oh yes.”

Oh no.

Not just no, but hell no.

At that moment, Toni came back with their first course of buckwheat blinis with crème fraîche, three kinds of roes along with a plate of buttered toast points, and hard-boiled egg yolks. She also set a cutting board on the table with finely sliced salmon, figs, some cheeses, a dark seeded mustard, quince jam, and a small jar of honey that came with a honeycomb. Isabel indicated that she could remove the bottle she’d left on the table before setting their glasses of champagne in front of them along with two small plates.

“Oh no,” she told them before leaving.

Felicity wasn’t a very big fan of caviar; all too often she found it to be overly salty and unpleasantly fishy whenever it was served on canapés at the ubiquitous work gatherings, but she decided to give it a go anyway. She picked up one of the small blinis which resembled a miniature pancake, and used the bone spoon provided to put a small amount of the brown colored fish eggs in the center along with a little of the crème fraîche, then took a bite. Instead of the fishy taste she was expecting, the sweetness of the cream combined with the salty nuttiness of the roe was actually quite pleasant, “This is good.”

Isabel nodded, “I do prefer Beluga but Ossetra and the American caviars are rather good, aren’t they?”

“It’s a lot better than what they always served at the QC parties,” she said ruefully.

She arched an amused brow in her direction, “Yes, well, Moira Queen liked to think of herself as royalty but, in truth, she was just another gauche rich man’s wife playing at being a princess. The fact that she would serve cheap imitation caviar and sparkling wine to her employees, while instructing the catering staff to save the good champagne and canapés for the people who ‘count’, only proves that.”

“If Moira was just playing at being queen then what does that make you?” Felicity picked out one of the buttered toast points and built herself a mini open-faced sandwich of thinly sliced salmon, fig, and jam while she thought of how to play her next hand.

“I’m a whore, just as she always said I was,” Isabel answered simply. “Granted, I’m a very good whore but, unlike Moira, I never pretended to be anything else.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that I only sold my body while Moira Queen sold her soul. I’d say that sleeping my way to the top is the lesser of the two evils, wouldn’t you? I think the real reason Moira hated me wasn’t because Robert loved me more, but because she knew, deep down, that for all her money and privilege, a poor girl who made her fortune with only her wits and her thighs managed to out maneuver her in every way that counts.” Her eyes sparkled with something approaching amusement, “That and, unlike her, I know what good caviar is supposed to taste like.”
She waited until Isabel took a sip from her champagne before casually mentioning, “Speaking of powerful women, by the way, does Miranda know about your part in the whole Miller thing?”

Isabel paused, apparently having better control over her spit-take reflexes than Felicity did, much to her regret, “I thought that we were never going to speak of that ever again?”

“We weren’t but then I caught the senate hearing when I was getting dressed and noticed that HIVE did a number on Lois Lane on national television,” she said before biting into her little sandwich. “Damn, that’s good. I’m definitely getting a take-out menu for this place before we leave. I wonder if they deliver?”

It was a gamble but it paid off because Isabel’s posture stiffened slightly. She reached for another blini and prepared another bite of her own, “How do you know it was HIVE?”

“It’s not my first time seeing them in action,” Felicity told her. “Which you already knew obviously because you recruited Lyla.”

“What I mean is how can you be sure it was HIVE?” She asked her. “They’ve been dark for quite some time and the display they allegedly put on today was hardly their usual MO.”

Felicity shrugged as she reached for another toast point, this time topping it with some of the trout roe, an egg yolk, and a bit of the crème fraîche. “I’ll admit, that part threw me a little, but her reaction was too similar to the other cases I’d seen to be anything else.”

“She could have been drugged,” Isabel suggested.

Felicity waited until after she took a bite before answering, “Maybe, but her drug panels were clean and her EEG showed heightened electrical activity in the memory centers of her brain.”

Barbara had texted her the results as well as a brief rundown on some of the information Bruce had shared with them just as they left Orbital. She’d been sitting on that information until the right opportunity made itself known. She watched as a brief flash of surprise lit up the other woman’s eyes, “You hacked her hospital records?”

“It’s what I do,” she said blithely. “Besides, since Miranda is supposedly gathering an army of Amazons to go after them I thought I should keep on top of things.”

If she showed a hint of surprise before, this time there was no denying she had hit the bull’s-eye. Isabel looked at her, her expression hardening slightly, “And how did you come by that information?”

“The Themyscirians are also a client,” she quoted back to her. “I had a thing for Greek mythology when I was a kid.” She was bluffing her ass off but there was no need for Isabel to know that. Besides, she’d seen crazier things in the last four years, why not Amazons as well?

Her eyes flickered as her own words came back to haunt her, “But how did you know about Miranda’s investigation?”

“You did your background checks and I did mine,” she said enigmatically. “My only question is what’s your connection to HIVE and were you behind the attack on Lois Lane.”

Isabel’s eyes flashed, “You think I’m HIVE?”

She nodded, “Either that or you’re close to someone who is and just called in a favor or two.”
She sat back in her seat, not bothering with her drink or her blini, “And yet you’re here sharing a meal with me.”

“A girl’s got to eat,” she told her, wiping her fingers on her napkin and taking a sip of her champagne. “Besides, I have a theory I’m working on and I thought you’d be the best person to come to with it.”

“Oh?” She said, arching a finely shaped eyebrow.

She nodded, reaching for another of the toast points to settle her nerves as she spoke, “My theory is that Orbital controls HIVE and that either you, Miranda, or both of you have been using whatever tech they possess in order to get the leg up on ARGUS. It would explain why you always seem to be two steps ahead of them. My question is how long has this been going on and, if I’m right, what are you planning to do with this army of yours.” She took a bite of her fig and salmon toast point, “After all, it’s fairly obvious you’re gearing up for something big.”

Isabel cleared her throat, “Let’s just say you’re right and I’m HIVE; what makes you think I won’t kill you?”

“You might; it’s certainly possible that you’ll at least try to kill me,” she told her, licking a small bit of jam off her finger, “but I was hoping we could finish dinner and go dancing first. I don’t mind telling you that I’ve been looking forward to it all day so if you could hold off a while on the whole murdering me thing, I’d really appreciate it.”

Isabel’s lips curled upwards in a smile as that strange light flashed in her eyes again, “You are delicious aren’t you, little bird?” Felicity faltered slightly as the other woman used Sara’s endearment for her. Isabel’s smile grew more feral as she saw the effect it had on her, “Or should I say ‘my little golden lioness’?” Her eyes skimmed over her form, “I’m so going to enjoy taming you.”

“So is that a yes to dancing or to the HIVE thing?” Felicity asked, trying to keep the tension she was feeling out of her voice.

“I did not order the attack on Lois Lane,” she told her with a hint of amusement.

“You might; it’s certainly possible that you’ll at least try to kill me,” she told her, licking a small bit of jam off her finger, “but I was hoping we could finish dinner and go dancing first. I don’t mind telling you that I’ve been looking forward to it all day so if you could hold off a while on the whole murdering me thing, I’d really appreciate it.”

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“I did not order the attack on Lois Lane,” she told her with a hint of amusement.

“Still doesn’t answer my question,” she pointed out.

“I’m not authorized to speak about the operation Miranda is planning, nor am I a member of HIVE. I suggest that if it’s answers you seek, you should talk to her,” she said easily.

But she did know something, that much was obvious. Felicity nodded, “Fair enough. One last question though; if you see yourself as a corporate vigilante, why get into bed with Miller and Mallory in the first place?”

She laughed, a slight tinkling of sound but there was still a coldness to it that set Felicity’s teeth on edge, “I’m no hero or vigilante. I joined Orbital for one reason and one reason only.”

“To take down the League,” she supplied.

“To avenge Robert,” she corrected. “I was never able to get proof of Moira’s hand in the sabotage of the Queen’s Gambit, but had she been the cause of his death I would have killed her; the same with Merlyn. Slade got to Moira first however, and Oliver to Merlyn, so now I must do my part and take out the League and Ra’s al Ghul.”

Felicity looked around them but no one appeared to be listening in. The diners closest to them had left just before their server brought them their drinks so they were virtually alone. “You would have
killed Moira?"

“Absolutely,” she told her. “Nor would I have felt any guilt doing it. After all, had I proof that she was behind his murder that would mean she had tried to kill her own son as well, does it not?”

“Do you think she was really capable of that?” Felicity asked.

She tilted her head slightly, “Yes, you don’t?”

Felicity pursed her lips, “Honestly? I think she was absolutely capable of killing anyone who got in her way but, despite that, I’d like to think that she wouldn’t kill her own son.”

“Which is another way of saying ‘yes’,” the other woman pointed out.

“I think she’s done worse things to Oliver,” she told her honestly, “but Moira always felt she was protecting him while she was doing them. I don’t think she would have sabotaged the Gambit knowing her son was a passenger.”

“It’s a moot point,” Isabel shrugged. “She’s dead and, as far as I know, Robert’s death was planned by Merlyn and the League.”

“So why get your hands dirty with Mallory?”

Isabel loaded up another blini and pursed her lips as if contemplating how to answer even though Felicity knew the woman probably had one already lined up and ready to go, “I’m a business woman first and foremost. Wayne didn’t need the contract, we did. Had Wayne won the bid then they would have had their own team develop the software so, when the opportunity presented itself, I did what I had to do.”

“Even if that meant risking it all on a putz like Mallory and a weasel like Miller?”

“Admittedly I wouldn’t have chosen to work with a ‘putz’ like Sebastien Mallory but he’s the one who came to me,” she told her with a slight smile. “As for Miller, he was up for sale anyway. If I hadn’t paid him, someone else would have.”

“Does Miranda know?”

Felicity observed as Isabel’s countenance darkened slightly, “She does.”

“And she’s not too happy about it, huh?”

“Miranda isn’t a businesswoman,” Isabel told her with a hint of sourness. “She runs Orbital but, in actuality, she doesn’t really run the businesses we acquire; I do. All she cares about is her mission; so no, she wasn’t happy. You and I, however, understand that sometimes we have to get our hands a bit dirty in order to do what must be done.”

Felicity examined the other woman carefully. There was a hint of genuine annoyance in her expression as she constructed another blini but it wasn’t directed at her. Also she was being sincere in the compliment she paid her just now. “How do you know?”

“Know what?” She asked her, “Know that you’ve gotten your hands dirty?” She chuckled, “The fact that you covered my tracks so carefully without revealing it to Oliver for one, and two; you showed your darkness in the ring with Helena this morning. I genuinely thought you were going to kill her for a moment there.” Felicity felt a heaviness settle over her and it must have been reflected in her expression because Isabel added, “There’s no shame in being strong, Felicity. You should be
proud of the fact that you own that power within yourself. Too many people fear what they’re capable of; women like us do not.”

She should have kept her mouth shut, she knew that; Isabel wasn’t to be trusted. Frankly the woman scared the shit out of her but…

…the truth was that she could have killed her easily and she knew it. The light everyone associated with her had now been tempered with darkness and, in that regard alone, she felt an odd sort of kinship with Isabel. This was a woman who lived in the shadows and thrived; she didn’t fight them like Sara or Oliver did. While that was part of what made them heroes, they expected more from her and that made talking about these things difficult. Whenever she would try to discuss it, (which, granted, wasn’t often) they would either change the subject or assure her that she had nothing to feel guilty about. What they didn’t understand was that it wasn’t guilt she felt. Oh, she did feel something akin to guilt, but what she really felt was anger.

It wasn’t something she often admitted to herself, but she was angry. Every time she thought about Slade, every time she remembered pulling the trigger and taking a life, she felt angry because… because they didn’t trust her enough nor did they have enough confidence in her abilities to ask for help. Because they tried keeping her out of the loop she’d had no choice but to go after them. That’s where her guilt came from; she felt guilty because part of her blamed them for creating that situation in the first place.

It was sick, it was wrong, but that was what the demon in her heart whispered to her in her nightmares. It was that Slade was right; in the end he was the only one who saw her.

“How many men have you killed?” She asked her quietly.

Isabel looked at her sharply but then her expression changed from cool detachment to something approaching empathy. It was an odd moment for Felicity; seeing the woman she didn’t trust and didn’t like understand her better than the people who claimed to love her. “A few,” she said at last. “When you join the League you’re required to take a life, usually someone who has been convicted of an unforgivable crime and who deserves to die. My first victim was a man who had raped countless scores of women. I picked him myself.”

“What was he?” She asked.

Isabel’s eyes grew hard as stone, “One of the overseers from the mines. For all I knew he could have been my father; at least, that’s what I told myself when I plunged my sword into his chest. My only regret was that he died far too quickly for my liking.” She glanced at her from under a fall of dark lashes, “And you?”

“I don’t know,” she told her faintly. She inhaled sharply and leaned forward, rubbing away the sudden chill that passed over her flesh, “Maybe five or six; maybe more. I lost count. I remember the first one and the second, but then it just became about moving past the bodies as they fell so I could complete my objective. By the time I was out of bullets I was pretty much numb. I barely even noticed their faces. I never even knew their names.”

Isabel’s expression revealed her surprise, “And Oliver knows about this?”

“He knows I killed Slade Wilson; the rest we never talked about.”

The other woman froze, “You killed Deathstroke; not the Arrow?” She sat back from the table and stared at her for several long seconds before a look of respect replaced shock, “Just when I thought you could no longer surprise me…” She took a long sip of her champagne, then licked the sweet
remnants of it off her lips before speaking again, “How?”

“Magnetic charge; I attached it to his armor,” she told her dully.

“That would do it,” she said ruefully. Her expression grew heated and she offered her a slow, sensuous smile, before chuckling under her breath. “I don’t mind telling you that, right now, I find you extremely intriguing. In fact,” her lips parted and that odd light appeared in the dark depths of her gaze as she leaned in, “I don’t think I have ever found anyone as attractive as I find you in a very long time.”

She blinked, “Um, thank you? That…wasn’t quite the reaction I was expecting…”

Isabel laughed, a genuine laugh that surprised her so much it nearly made her jump out of her skin, “I think that far too many people have been underestimating you for far too long, Felicity; me chiefly among them.” She lifted her glass in a salute, “S’siloy kotoraya lezhit vnutri nas! I must endeavor to do better by you in the future.”

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They made it through the second and third courses by keeping to safer topics like fashion and such. By the time they were nearly done with the fourth course of steak tartare topped with caviar and a fried quail egg, they were back to the more difficult topics.

“Oliver flew into town this afternoon,” Isabel said as she broke the yolk of her egg allowing it to coat the seasoned and marinated chopped steak like a creamy sauce.

Felicity frowned then sighed, “I thought he might.”

“You’re not surprised?” She said with a knowing smile.

She tossed her a rueful look, “I’m not stupid; drawing him in has obviously been your plan all along. You’ve managed to recruit Lyla, Sara, Helena, and myself, not to mention other team friendlies to Batman’s mission. It’s obvious that you and Miranda are bringing together the two teams; what for though, I still have no idea.”

Isabel took a bit of her tartare and spread it on a crostini before taking a healthy bite, “I don’t think you’re stupid,” she said, humming slightly as she chewed her food slowly. She took the time to suck her thumb into her mouth in order to clean the small amount of yolk and caviar that was left behind. This was an unexpected side of Isabel she was just beginning to see come out; she was like a sleek black cat, playful and earthy. It was as though her earlier confession had broken down some of her walls so that she no longer felt the need to hide behind an icy exterior. No, this Isabel was the sensual creature who had thoroughly captured Robert Queen’s heart. “In fact, I think you’re very intelligent.” She hummed again, “I love steak tartare; so many people fear it even when it’s served in such an elegant way, but there’s just something so primal about eating meat raw, don’t you think?”

“It’s good.” Felicity admitted as she placed a few of the micro greens along with a bit of the tartare, egg, and caviar mixture on top of her own crostini. The courses were small, just a few bites per plate, but very rich. They were only four courses in and she was already wondering if she could get through them all. She wasn’t full yet, but she was getting there. “So why are you bringing in Batman and the Arrow?”

“What makes you think we aren’t just recruiting the best qualified candidates?” She asked her. “Yes, we have chosen to recruit operators associated with both of their missions, but that’s merely because they’ve proven themselves in the field. Besides,” she pointed out as she took another sip of her
champagne, “Orbital is all about top of the line. Your words, remember?”

“Well, we both know that’s bullshit but since I’m really looking forward to the next course, I’ll play along,” she said just before biting into her own crostini.

Isabel chuckled, “You’re so straightforward in your language, aren’t you?” She said in amazement. “So many people hide themselves but you just are. I used to find that so naive and, quite frankly, a bit cloying but now, I see how that kind of openness can be a devastating weapon when applied correctly.”

“You make it sound like we’re engaged in some kind of fight to the death,” she responded with a smile of her own. “Is that what we’re doing, Isabel; fighting?”

“Absolutely,” she said, surprising her with her own sudden incursion into honesty. “The very essence of life is conflict; sex, business, politics. Why do you think that they call the joining of a man and woman the ‘battle of the sexes’?”

“But we’re both women,” she pointed out.

“Which makes for an even deadlier game,” Isabel told her. “Men are easy; simple. They bulldoze through life and take what they want. Even when they seek to deceive, their lies are fairly straightforward. Women however,” she used her finger to scoop up a bit of egg and caviar from her now empty plate then sucked it onto her mouth, “women are creatures of subtlety. Even in nature we’re the deadlier sex because we sit on the precipice of life and death. It is within ourselves that all life begins and yet we are the ones who hunt and kill to protect and nurture that life. Men only do so to prove their superiority to one another.”

“I’m going to have to disagree,” Felicity said, taking a drink of her water to wash away the saltiness on her tongue. “Men are capable of being nurturers.”

Isabel gave her a slightly superior look, “But they are the exception to the rule. Women are at the center of all things, Felicity. Nothing is as fierce as a lioness protecting what’s hers.”

At that moment their server returned with the fifth course; an egg that was breaded then deep fried in panko and served on top of a creamy cippolini onion soubise with a dollop of caviar on top. After Toni cleared the plates, Felicity cut open her egg and watched as the yolk ran into the béchamel-like sauce in the bottom of the plate. She took a healthy bite and moaned, “So good. You know, you go through life thinking you can cook and then you see something like this and realize you’ve just been opening cans and tossing stuff in a pan. I mean, how do they even do this?”

“You cook?” Isabel asked in surprise.

“A bit,” she admitted. “I’ll admit that I eat more than my fair share of take-out but that gets old after a while. I don’t often get to actually cook a real dinner though. I’ve mostly just gotten very good at using my crockpot and electric pressure cooker; you?”

“No,” Isabel told her. “Cooking was never a skill I was taught. When I was a child we didn’t have a lot of food so other than boiled cabbage, potatoes, and beets, there wasn’t much to work with. After I left Russia, well,” her lips turned upwards slightly, “my skills were needed in rooms other than the kitchen.” She bit into her egg before asking, “I’m curious, how does the daughter of a man as wealthy as Lucius Fox become so domesticated?” She looked at her curiously, “Even living off of your salary from QC alone you could have afforded a better home in a much nicer neighborhood back in Starling. You enjoy comfort obviously, you buy expensive and well-tailored clothing; the car you leased wasn’t exactly cheap but you certainly could have afforded something far more luxurious
than a Mini.”

She looked at her steadily, “What are you trying to ask?”

“Were you just playing at poor or were you trying to prove something?”

She took a moment before answering her, “First off, I did grow up wealthy, yes, but Lucius is a self- made man,” Felicity pointed out. “All of his money was earned and we were raised in comfort but not extravagance. Neither Lucius nor Tanya ever wanted us to become dependent on that wealth. We were each required to volunteer at the Foundation during the summer and after school and Tanya was especially adamant that we see people for who they are and not just what comes along with the trappings of wealth. I have a trust fund obviously, but that money can’t be accessed until I’m thirty-five without Lucius’s approval. I don’t even know how much is in it because it’s locked up in a blind trust, nor do I care.”

“Really?” She asked in a tone that implied otherwise.

“Really,” she said dryly. “Frankly, the whole ‘idle rich’ scene is a bit gross if you ask me so, in that way you could say that yes, I am trying to prove something.”

“And what is it that you’re trying to prove?”

She debated answering that for a moment. It was a deceptively simple question but any way she answered it would reveal more about herself than she wanted to. “I wanted to prove that I could take care of myself without anyone else’s help,” she said at last.

Isabel took another sip of champagne. Their waitress made sure to keep both their water and champagne glasses full and, while Felicity just had a few sips of absinthe and one glass of champagne, Isabel had been drinking steadily all night. She wasn’t drunk, but she was buzzed. Felicity noted that her body language had also become far more open and relaxed over the last hour or so. It was as though she no longer saw Felicity as a threat; at least, not as much of a threat. There were still some shields in place, but as the dinner progressed, Isabel became more open in both her responses as well as in her overt displays of attraction towards her. She reached across the table, one crimson-tipped nail trailing over the back of her hand, “And joining Orbital is a part of that, yes?”

“Yes, I guess it is,” she admitted reluctantly. “Why are you bringing the two teams together?”

She shrugged, “I’m not. Miranda is the one who did most of the recruiting and her reasons are her own.”

“You recruited me,” she pointed out.

“I did, yes; and it was a very wise decision on my part, obviously,” Isabel purred. She picked up her hand and Felicity allowed it although she still wasn’t comfortable with the other woman touching her. Isabel turned her hand over and traced the lines on her palm curiously. “Have you ever had your palm read?”

“No,” she chuckled, taken slightly off-guard. “I don’t really believe in that stuff and, frankly, I’d be surprised if you did.”

Isabel tilted her head to the side and smiled down at her hand, her nail tickling her skin as she traced each line one by one. “I don’t believe in it really, but I do find it fascinating.” She traced the length of each one of her fingers starting with her pinkie, “Mercury, Apollo, Saturn, Jupiter,” she smoothed her fingers across the fatty part of her palm at the base of her thumb, “and this is the mount of Venus. This part here though,” she skimmed the outside of her palm under her pinkie next, “this is the mount
of Luna. Notice how the mightiest of the male gods are represented by the fingers but the female gods control them through the hand itself.”

Felicity flinched slightly at the tickling sensation but kept her hand still, “I always thought there were supposed to be life lines and love lines and stuff in palmistry.”

“There are,” she told her. Isabel’s finger traced the topmost line closest to her fingers, “This is the line of the heart,” she moved to the next line under that which cut across her palm, “the line of the head,” she moved on to the one that branched off from it and followed the curve of her thumb, “the line of life. This one,” she came from her wrist and traced the other half of the line that also followed the curve of her thumb before meeting and blending with her life line, “is the line of health. These,” she traced the lines on her wrist below her palm, her fingers ghosting over the blue veins visible underneath the skin, “are the bracelets of life itself.”

“So is that everything?” She asked her.

“No,” Isabel said softly. “Will,” she traced her thumb, “marriage,” the area just under her pinky, “and fate.” She cut across her palm, tracing the faint line from the base of her middle finger to her wrist.

“And what does all that mean? Am I fated to meet a tall dark man who’ll sweep me up into his arms and carry me off to his castle where we’ll live happily ever after with three kids and a dog?” She joked.

Isabel shook her head, “No. According to your palm there will be no husband, see?” She pointed to the empty space under her pinky. “However your love line is strong. It goes all the way up,” Her fingertip skimmed the line and teased the sensitive skin between her middle and forefinger, “touching and branching off between Jupiter and Saturn. This shows you have great power and that you will have many admirers. You are capable of inspiring great passion but that you have only just begun to explore what that means.”

“Really?” She said, playing along. “What else do you see? Will I live to be a hundred and die in my sleep?”

She stilled, “Your fate is tangled and broken; it’s connected strongly to the line of Venus, the heart, and your will.”

Despite herself, the seriousness of the way Isabel was speaking was making her feel rather uneasy, “And what does that mean exactly?”

“Death is coming,” she told her darkly.

“Is that a threat?” She asked, pulling her hand back.

“A warning,” Isabel told her, her eyes glowing with that odd cast once more. “I think that you are caught up in a game, a dangerous game that’s been playing since long before you even knew it existed. You should keep that in mind; not all questions should be asked because sometimes the answers you seek come at a cost.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” Felicity asked her, dropping all pretense of amusement as a stab of fear sliced through her.

“Meaning that you and I are more similar than you’d think,” she told her. “Both of us began our lives as pieces on a chess board; pawns in a game not of our choosing. I chose to accept that and play the game to my advantage with eyes wide open. You, however,” cold black eyes met ones the color of a darkening sky, “I don’t know what your place is in all this, but it would sadden me to see you
destroyed by it. I never thought that would be the case, but now…” She looked at her again, “Now I think I can finally see what it is that draws them to you.”

She was about to demand answers when their next course arrived which consisted of a small square of seared foie gras served on a bed of fresh strawberries, and a buttered toast square with pistachios sprinkled around it. Felicity looked at her plate and immediately handed it back, “I’m sorry, I have a nut allergy; I should have said something…”

Isabel turned angry eyes towards the woman in front of them, “I did say something when I made the reservations!”

“Oh!” Toni said, taking it away immediately, “Would you like me to have the chef remake it without the nuts or would you like me to just bring out the next course instead?”

“What we would like is for you to be more competent at your job,” Isabel bit out.

Their server flushed in embarrassment and Felicity immediately stepped in, “It’s alright,” she assured her.

“No, it’s not,” Isabel said, her eyes flashing in contempt as she dressed down the poor woman in front of them. “What if she had eaten that and had a fatal reaction as a result?”

“I, um, d-did you want to speak to the manager?” She asked uncertainly.

“Yes--!”

“Take mine away as well,” Isabel snapped. “And make sure to tell your manager that whoever takes the reservations should be more careful when someone tells them that a member of their party has a serious food allergy!”

Felicity glanced at the woman across from her with a mixture of embarrassment and confusion. Luckily the restaurant was fairly empty but the few patrons that were there turned towards them curiously. “You know what, if you could just ask the chef to skip the next two courses and just bring us dessert along with some coffee and the check, that would be wonderful.”

“Yes, of course,” she said quickly, removing their plates. “Would you prefer regular coffees or espresso?”

“I think we could use the caffeine so I’m going to go with espresso,” she told her. “Isabel?”

She waved her off, “That’s fine.”

As soon as the woman left, Felicity turned to her, “Isabel, the way you treated that woman was completely uncalled for.”

“Why? Do you find her attractive?” Isabel asked, her voice taking on a brittle edge.

“No,” she said taken aback. “I just think you were being rude and while a mistake was made, it’s not the end of the world.”

“I was just trying to protect you,” she said quietly, her hand reaching out to touch hers again.
“Um,” she cleared her throat, her brow furrowing in confusion, “thank you, but…”

“No buts,” Isabel said playfully, her entire mood shifting so suddenly Felicity felt like she had a case of mental whiplash, “your safety is important to me.”

Since when? She thought silently, feeling more than a little creeped out by the odd mood that seemed to have overtaken Isabel. Maybe she had more to drink than she thought, “And I appreciate that, really.”

Isabel tangled their fingers together. She looked at her with just a hint of desperation in her eyes, “I know that we’ve shared a rather unfortunate past but I need you to know how truly sorry I am. I treated you abominably when I should have seen you for who you were and recognized that much sooner.”

“It’s fine…”

“No!” Isabel said, tightening her grip on her fingers slightly. Her eyes grew soft and slightly dream-like, “No,” she said in a softer tone, “I’ve wronged you in so many ways but that was before I knew how alike we were and I want you to know that I feel such a strong connection to you; truly. I’ve never felt this connected to anyone with the exception of Robert, in fact.”

“Okay,” she said shifting uncomfortably. Isabel had a pretty good grip on her hand but she managed to gently disengage their fingers before speaking, “I think that when we leave I should drive. Either that or we should just take a cab.”

“We could… go back to my apartment?” Isabel suggested with a heated look. “There’s so much I still want to share with you.”

“I’m not, um, I don’t…” Felicity grimaced, “Wow, um, not that this hasn’t been great, but--”

Toni came back with a tray along with another woman who Felicity assumed was the manager. “I’m Kim, one of the co-owners,” the tall brunette woman said with a polite smile. “I just wanted to come over and apologize for the mix up in the kitchen and let you know that we adjusted your bill accordingly and that I will be having a meeting with our reservation staff to make sure this never happens again.”

Isabel opened her mouth to deliver what was bound to be a blazing reply. Hoping to avoid going through that a second time, she instinctively reached for Isabel’s hand and squeezed it, causing the other woman to look at her in a mixture of surprise and some other very uncomfortable emotion that Felicity was equally eager to avoid. “That’s fine; mistakes happen.”

Kim nodded and Toni set their dessert and coffees in front of them, “The chef went ahead and prepared you the crème brûlée for two instead of the raspberry parfait as it contains hazelnut extract in the mousse. Also, we would like to invite you to the bar upstairs and present you with some free drink vouchers to make up for it.”

“I suppose we can’t ask for more than that,” Isabel said reluctantly as she turned to the owner. “Thank you.”

“And Isabel is sorry for overreacting the way she did,” Felicity said, even though Isabel threw her a look that said she didn’t regret shit.

“Not at all,” she told her. “Our youngest daughter has a nut allergy so I absolutely understand why you were upset. My wife would have reacted in the exact same way yours did.”
“We’re not—” Felicity began.

“Thank you,” Isabel said cutting her off with a smug look. “As you said, I was just concerned for my darling Felicity’s health and safety.” She picked up the check and reached into her purse, pulling out a card and handing it to their server. “We’ll be sure to go up as soon as we’re done here. You did say you wanted to go dancing, right?”

“Yeah, I could…um, okay?” Felicity said, resisting the urge to burst out, ‘what the fuck?’

Well, if nothing else maybe the physical activity would sober her up. Drunk affectionate Isabel was scaring the living shit out of her.

“No problem. Please, enjoy,” both women offered with a smile before leaving them to finish their meal in private.

Felicity shut her eyes in confusion, “Isabel, are you feeling alright?”

“I’m fine,” she said brightly, releasing her hand and scooping up some of the dessert. “Hmm, very good,” she said dipping her spoon in the burnt sugar crust again and presenting the spoon to Felicity, “taste.”

She looked at the spoon in confusion, realizing that the other woman intended to feed her. After a second’s debate, she reluctantly opened her mouth and allowed her to place it on her tongue. She swallowed and nodded, “Mmm! Yep, that’s…good stuff.” She rubbed her temple, feeling like she was in for the mother-humper of all migraines later, “Um, Isabel…?”

“I don’t normally eat dessert but this is quite good,” she said, taking another bite before scooping up some more and presenting that one to her as well.

“I’m full,” she said, feeling extremely weirded out. “Hey, um, by the way; before the whole,” she waved her hand over the table, “thing happened, you said something about me being part of a game? What exactly did you mean by that?”

“Forget what I said,” Isabel said dismissively. “It’s…I’ll handle it; no need to worry.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen,” she said slowly. “I’m a worrier, it’s kind of my thing.”

“And I’m telling you that you have nothing to worry about,” the other woman said firmly. “Everything’s fine.”

Bullshit, she thought but it was obvious that Isabel was shutting that door so she decided to take another tack. “I know you said earlier that you couldn’t discuss the reason Miranda was bringing in these other operatives but when I met with her she said Orbital’s main focus was on Ra’s al Ghul and the League; what’s the link? Is HIVE connected to the League, or…”

“Miranda’s main focus is on taking down the League as is mine,” she told her, her eyes sharp. “As for HIVE, as I said before, I can’t speak on that but I will say that every action and decision Miranda has made thus far goes toward our ultimate goal of taking down Ra’s.”

She frowned, “Okay, so is she planning on taking him head on by bringing her own private troops into Nanda Parbat? Because, from what I understand, that’s not exactly going to be easy. From what Sara told me, the terrain makes it impossible to fly in directly and their defenses are formidable to say the least.”

“Miranda is too smart for that,” she said with a huff. “Besides, Ra’s isn’t in Nanda Parbat. Actually,
he hasn’t been seen in a few years which is one of the reasons why she’s been able to systematically take down as many of his operations as she has.”

That’s a startling bit of intel, Felicity thought, her eyebrows shooting up as she examined the other woman’s body language carefully, finding none of the usual tells to show she was being less than honest. In fact, it was almost as though she were being too honest. She picked up Isabel’s glass of champagne carefully and sniffed it.

“Is something wrong?” She asked curiously.

“No, I’m just a little thrown by this sudden spate of honesty from you,” she told her. “I wasn’t sure if someone slipped you some truth serum or something.”

She chuckled, “I have no reason to lie about that,” she told her. “After all, you are the director, or will be soon enough, and the fact that Ra’s hasn’t been seen by anyone in almost two years is hardly secret.”

“Two years?” She repeated.

She nodded, “No one has seen him in two years and our informants tell us he has not set foot in Nanda Parbat in all of that time.”

“Have you guys considered the fact that he could be dead?” She asked, stating the obvious.

“It’s more than possible,” Isabel admitted. “Still, Miranda is convinced he’s gone underground and, until she has definitive proof of that, she won’t stop hunting him down.”

“I thought she said he was immortal?”

“Not immortal,” Isabel corrected, “he’s human and he can be killed just like anyone else. He ages at a normal rate and can succumb to wounds or disease which is why he relies on the Pits to maintain his youth and health but, from what I understand, he can only use each Pit once. The rumor we heard is that he basically ran out of them.”

That gelled with what Bruce told her. “Why is she so convinced he’s still alive then?”

“It’s not the first time he’s disappeared from sight for one, and two,” she grimaced, “Miranda is fixated on the man. Until she sees for herself that he’s dead, she will not stop hunting him down.”

“He did murder her entire family,” she pointed out.

“I’m not criticizing her motivations,” Isabel clarified, “merely her way of going about things.”

She focused on her expression, “Meaning what?”

“Meaning that I have seen my fair share of complex plans go awry,” she said simply. “I have learned through bitter experience that sometimes it is better to let go of the past and regroup so that one can fight another day. It does no good to get caught up in someone else’s obsession even when you share similar goals.”

“So you think she’s obsessed?”

“You don’t?”

She shrugged, “I don’t know her as well as you do. Then again, aren’t all vigilantes obsessive personalities to a certain extent. They punish themselves and push their bodies to the absolute limits
in order to achieve their goals.”

“Do you see yourself as a vigilante?” Isabel asked curiously.

Felicity frowned, “I don’t know. I guess if I were applying that standard to myself, then no,” she said at last. “I mean, I do see myself as a vigilante in a way but I can’t say as I have one particular mission. I just want to make the world a better place.”

Again, Isabel hummed in approval and placed her hand over Felicity’s, “You have a precious heart; such a rare thing in our world. How did I not see just how wonderful you were before?”

“I’m not exactly all kittens and rainbows,” she chuckled uncomfortably.

Note to self: No more booze for Isabel tonight.

“Of course not,” the other woman scoffed, giving her hand an affectionate pat. “You understand that sometimes it is necessary to own the darkness rather than always fighting against it. Only a fool would limit themselves to one point of view. Life is not a question of good and evil but survival. To survive we must often do things that are less than savory but, in the end, those acts are necessary.”

Felicity pulled her hand away again, “So you’re saying that the ends always justify the means?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “Anyone who says differently is either lying or a fool.”

She furrowed her brow, “That’s a rather cynical way of looking at things.”

“Life makes cynics of us all,” she told her unashamedly. “Take war, for example.”

“War?” She asked.

She smiled coldly, “Wars are fought by men who kill and die for a cause, whose bodies are tortured and starved on the battlefields, or so we’re told. In truth, wars begin and end behind closed doors by men who never have to so much as touch a weapon or risk even a drop of their own blood. The men who die are merely chess pieces and, as they fall, the politicians tally up the dead like so many points on a scoreboard, They decide among themselves when the last man should fall and which side should be declared the victor, not the men who actually do the fighting and dying.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” she objected. “People fight because they believe in something greater than themselves.”

“Perhaps you’re right, perhaps not; but there is some truth to what I said,” Isabel told her, taking a sip from her cup. “This mission against the League and Ra’s al Ghul is a war. You and I, we’re just soldiers marching toward a single goal not of our choosing or our making, but we’ll keep fighting until someone wins. That, or until someone decides to take us off the board.”

“Who?”

“Ra’s,” she said simply.

“What about you? Are you obsessed with taking him down as much as Miranda is?” Felicity asked, taking a chance.

“At various points in my life, yes,” she told her. “After Robert died I was most certainly in the throes of obsession, not that it matters.” She shrugged, “Robert’s death drove me to seek out those who could help me get my revenge. I lost myself in pursuit of retribution for the wrongs done to me. I
even went a bit mad but, in the end, I’m a survivor. When I saw myself slipping into someone else’s
madness I pulled myself out and regrouped like you did. I found Miranda and saw that our goals
were not dissimilar. Admittedly, we do not always see eye to eye but, compared to how things were
before I joined her cause, it’s an acceptable compromise.”

“What is it you disagree with?” Felicity asked.

Isabel’s eyes flickered slightly, “Small things, nothing important. We merely have different
managerial styles.” She shook her head and made a dismissive gesture, “Obsession, heroes, villains,
right, wrong, justice; they’re just words in the end. No matter what you do, death awaits us all. You
can’t fight that. Even Ra’s, as old as he is, has to succumb to fate eventually. So, if he is dead, I will
happily spit on his bones and just move on. Miranda however, I doubt she’s even capable of that
anymore.”

“Meaning what?”

The other woman gave her a steady look, “Let’s just say that Miranda needs her revenge; if he’s
dead then that means she’ll never have it.”

Toni came back with Isabel’s card and she thanked her then wrote in a surprisingly generous thirty
percent tip, obviously having gotten over her previous outburst.

“Thank you,” Toni said, placing a small box of truffles on the table for them along with a few
vouchers. “When you’re ready, the stairs to the bar are located near the restrooms. Have a good
evening.”

Felicity waited until they were alone again then formulated a new plan of attack. Sensing she’d lose
her if she pressed too hard, she asked, “You know, am I the only one who thinks that this whole
thing with Ra’s is insane?”

“How so?” Isabel inquired.

“I mean that he would go to the lengths he has just to produce this male heir of his,” she scoffed.
“Even if he is the modern version of Methuselah, surely he’s figured it out by now, right?”

“Ra’s is a madman,” Isabel sneered. “That whole ‘heir’ business is merely an excuse he uses to build
his powerbase and rein in his cult. The truth is that he did have his precious heir and he still rejected
him.”

“You mean Damian?” She asked.

“I meant his son,” she told her, “Dusan.”

Felicity’s jaw dropped, “Ra’s had a son?”

“It’s not common knowledge, but yes,” Isabel preened slightly, as though pleased that she had elicited that type of reaction from her.

“Wow,” she said, biting her bottom lip, “How did you find out about him?”

“I have my sources,” she said enigmatically.

“So if he has a son, then why isn’t he his heir? Is he dead or…?”

“From what I’ve heard, yes; but Ra’s rejected him as a possible heir long ago.”
“Why?”

“He felt he was too imperfect,” she said simply.

“What made him ‘imperfect’?” She asked.

“Who knows,” she said dismissively. “Again, Miranda is far more knowledgeable about these matters. I don’t really care, myself. As far as I’m concerned, this religion Ra’s has built around himself is pure nonsense and anyone who allows themselves to become caught in the middle of it is a fool. Now,” she said, her expression shifting, “I do believe we were going to dance.”

“Uh, sure,” Felicity said, getting up.

Isabel placed her hand at the center of her back and led her towards the stairs. Her phone began to ring and the other woman stopped to pull it out of her purse then frowned, “It’s Miranda.” She picked up, “Can you hold on a moment?” She placed her hand over the receiver and looked to Felicity, “Why don’t you head upstairs and I’ll join you in a moment after I’ve finished my phone call? It shouldn’t take long.”

“Sure,” she said then froze as Isabel leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to her cheek.

“I’ll be up soon,” she said with a slightly husky undertone as she used her thumb to wipe away the faint imprint of her lipstick from her skin.

“Okay,” she said uneasily before turning quickly and disappearing up the stairs. “I am so in over my head here,” she muttered. “If Bruce was here he’d be saying ‘I told you so’ right now.” She paused, “Actually he’d be dragging me out of here and then he’d say ‘I told you so’, and for once I wouldn’t even be tempted to argue because, holy fuck, I am really in over my head for sure. Just…just keep it together,” she told herself. “Even if that woman tells you she wants to wear your ass like a cheap hat, you just keep it together.”

At first glance, the upstairs of Nereid looked less like a ‘bar’ and more like an upscale coffeehouse. Instead of tables and chairs, there were several couches set up all around the large room around low tables creating intimate conversation areas and in between the colorful framed pin up posters were floating bookshelves filled with books and knick knacks and a large American Graffiti style oversized jukebox on one side of the room with a digital display and touchscreen. The only thing that really screamed ‘bar’ was the long polished counter and the wall behind it that contained shelves filled with various bottles of wines and spirits. Above the head of the bartender was a sexy pin-up style mermaid outlined in glowing green and pink neon lights and a sign that read ‘Sirens’ in bright aquamarine.

The bar was a little more busy than the restaurant had been but not as full as one might expect. Apparently the cold weather had driven their customers away as well, but there were several patrons still scattered about. Two or three couples were slow dancing to ‘Beautiful’ by Mc’Shell Ndegeocello but most were seated around the bar or talking in conversational tones in small groups. It was as low key as the hostess promised it would be. It was definitely more her style than Irie or even Verdant… even if all the couples dancing were women.

She took a seat and the bartender immediately approached her, “Margaritas are half-price tonight if you’re interested?”

“Well, normally I’d love a good margarita but my date’s getting a bit handsy so I’d better stick to club soda with lime instead,” she said ruefully.
“Make that two,” a dark haired woman said as she sat on the stool beside her. “And put them both on my tab.”

“Thanks,” Felicity said, turning to the woman beside her.

“Renee,” she said introducing herself with a flirtatious grin.

“Felicity,” she offered. Her new companion was obviously Latina and tall; easily 5’7” or 8” and a healthy weight; curvy and muscular but still trim. She was wearing a pair of dark slacks that hit low in the hips, low-heeled boots, a white button down shirt that hugged her figure and emphasized her generous bust, topped by a black leather jacket. Her shiny black hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she didn’t appear to be wearing any make up although she really didn’t need it. Her olive skin glowed with health under the lights and her dark eyes swept over Felicity’s figure appreciatively in return.

“Like what you see, sweetheart?” She asked her teasingly.

“Sorry,” she flushed. “I didn’t mean to stare.”

“No problem,” she said nodding at the bartender when she brought over their drinks. “I can understand the impulse; you’re not too hard on the eyes yourself.”

“I am really going to have to switch perfumes or something because…unbelievable,” she shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair in disbelief.

“Care to clue me in on the joke, sweetness?” She asked with a grin.

She sighed, “It’s just that I spent the last several years hung up on someone and they barely looked twice at me. Actually, erase that; *no one* looked twice at me. I practically lived in a club for three and a half years, passed through it a million times when it was standing room only, and never once did anyone so much as speak to me. Then suddenly, just within the last few weeks or so, it’s like I’ve become the human equivalent of catnip or something.”

“I could say something incredibly filthy right now,” Renee said before taking a sip of her drink. At Felicity’s confused look she lifted her eyebrows meaningfully, “‘Catnip?’” She prompted, “It’s a girl bar; get it?”

She flushed crimson, “Oh God, I didn’t mean it like that,” she said, mortified.

“You are a cutie aren’t you?” Renee merely chuckled. “So where’s this handsy date of yours anyway?”

“Downstairs taking a call from work,” she said before adding, “and it’s not really a date. She’s my boss…sort of.”

“Oh? So what is it you do, anyway? Wait,” she stopped her just as she opened her mouth to speak, “let me guess; I used to be pretty good at this.”

“Okay,” Felicity shrugged as the other woman looked her up and down carefully.

“Actress, right?” She guessed.

“Not even close,” she told her wryly.

“Yeah, well, it is the theatre district; you can’t blame me for going for the obvious. Let me try again;
best two out of three?”

“Go for it,” Felicity said, getting into the spirit of things and turning towards her as she tried again.

“Hmm,” Renee said looking at her thoughtfully, “Got it; you’re either a fashion designer or a model but definitely something within the fashion industry, right?”

“Strike two,” she said wrinkling her nose in sympathy.

“Damn,” she cursed with a grimace. “I used to be so good at this, too. Okay, I give up; what is it you do?”

“I work for an anti-trafficking charity,” she told her using her cover.

“No shit? Do-gooder, huh?” She said jovially, giving her a look of respect. “Well, right on; that’s pretty cool Felicity…?” She allowed her voice to trail off questioningly.


“Oh, so is there a Mr. or a Ms. Fox to go along with the Smoak?”

“Yep, four of them actually,” at Renee’s raised eyebrow she added, “My dad, his first wife, and my brother and sister. I was adopted,” she clarified. “Smoak was my mother’s maiden name.”

She nodded, “So you’re single then?”

Felicity paused, “Uh, kind of,” she said uncertainly.

Renee snorted, “Been there, done that.”

“So what’s your last name?”

“Montoya,” she told her. “Renee Montoya.”

“And is there a Mrs. Montoya?” She asked, throwing back her earlier question.

“Just my mom and she died a few years ago,” she told her. “I had a girlfriend, Daria, but she left me a few months back.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said with a sympathetic look.

Renee shrugged, “It was my fault. I was drinking pretty heavily and going through some heavy shit and she just couldn’t take it anymore.” She brightened, offering her another flirty grin, “It’s okay now though. I’m on the wagon, hence the alcohol free beverage,” she said saluting her with her glass, allowing the ice to make a tinkling sound, “and I’m doing something that helps people so I’m happy.”

“What do you do?” She asked curiously.

She turned in her chair to face her, “Guess.”

“Okay.” Felicity took in her appearance carefully. She was broad-shouldered but still feminine, her athletic build and upper body strength speaking towards the fact that she worked out frequently and had a job that required her to be fit. ‘Personal trainer?’ She thought, then immediately dismissed it. She noted the almost healed contusions across her knuckles; she’d been in a fight within the last week or so and it wasn’t at a gym because they would have wrapped her knuckles first. Also her
stance and the way she wore her clothes gave her the impression that this was what she considered to be her uniform rather than something she had deliberately chosen to go bar hopping in. Generally when someone dressed to meet someone they took care with their appearance and put on a spectacle of sorts, but this was not the case. While she was neat and her clothes expensive and well-tailored, they were designed to allow her to blend in rather than stand out. The last thing she noted was the scuff on the left side of her wide leather belt and the way her jacket stretched over her shoulders revealing a slight bulge under her arms, “Cop; more specifically a detective?” Felicity guessed.

Renee blinked in surprise, “Yeah. Well, I was; I’m with a private security firm now but…how did you know?”

“Well,” she said clearing her throat then pointing, “low heeled boots and slacks so you can run easily, scuff on the leather of your belt indicating that you sometimes clip a badge to it, then there’s the shoulder holsters under your jacket. I’m guessing…” she looked at the outline of the slight bulges carefully, “Glock 30’s to cut down the bulk but still give you the fire power of a .45 auto?”

Renee shifted in her stool and gave her a second look, “What kind of charity did you say you worked for?”

“It’s called the Orbital Organization,” she told her, mentally berating herself for letting her mouth run away with her.

“Huh; never heard of it,” she said with a frown. At that moment the song finished and Renee glanced from the juke box to Felicity, “Okay Miss Do-Gooder, care to dance?”

“I’m kind of with someone,” Felicity said uncertainly.

“Yeah, and she’s not here,” she pointed out as she got out of her seat. She took Felicity’s clutch from her and handed it to the bartender as she reached for her free hand. “Stow the lady’s bag behind the bar for me, okay Mo?”

“No problem,” she nodded, putting her clutch safely away.

She tugged on Felicity’s hand, “Come on Miss Felicity Smoak-Fox; let’s see if you know how to shake your ass.”

“Ohay,” she shrugged, allowing herself to be led out into the center of the room.

As they got to the dance floor someone walked over to the large jukebox and queued up ‘Poet’ by Jen Foster. Renee pulled her close, her hand resting just above her waist, and began to lead her in a slow dance.

Felicity glanced at the couples who surrounded them. Yeah, it was a weird situation but, even so, someone was dancing with her so she really couldn’t complain. For a while they just danced and Felicity closed her eyes and enjoyed the moment as she listened to the lyrics.

//I was the writer of careless words
And you the reader who finally learned
I'm just a liar in love with love
And you the dreamer just waking up//

“So what’s your deal, Felicity?” Renee asked suddenly.

“What do you mean?” She said with a frown.
She pulled back slightly, “There’s no way in hell you just work at a charity,” she said confidently. “In fact, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were a cop yourself.”

“Me?” She chuckled in surprise. “Why would you say that?”

“I don’t know,” she said musingly. “I guess it’s just the way your mind works, I guess.”

“I just don’t care for mysteries,” she told her. “Not having the answers bothers me so I learned how to solve them.”

“Not just that; it’s the way you carry yourself,” she told her. “Then there’s the way you recognized the bulges under my jacket and correctly identified them without batting an eyelash. You’re either a cop, a criminal, or some kind of high class assassin enjoying a night off from killing people by hanging out in a girl bar.”

“A friend of mine’s dad is a cop and he taught me how to shoot,” she explained easily. “I’m a nerd so I studied up for it, that’s all.”

“You studied up on different gun models,” she said dubiously.

“Yeah, well, I needed to find a gun I could wear under my clothes that wasn’t overly bulky.”

Renee stopped, pulling away from her, “You carry a concealed weapon?”

“I have a permit,” she assured her. “Besides, I don’t have one on me right now. Seriously, I couldn’t even wear a bra under this much less a gun holster.”

“Why?”

“Backless,” she told her.

“No, why do you have a concealed carry permit?” She asked her with a hard look.

“Because it’s the law,” she answered with a frown.

“Jesus Christ,” she muttered, shaking her head, “No, I mean why do you need to carry a gun?”

“Oh,” she flushed, “um, before I moved here I was the executive assistant to a CEO and he made for a pretty big target. I was caught in the crossfire one time too many so his bodyguard taught me self-defense and my friend on the force bought me a gun and taught me how to use it.” She cleared her throat, “I’m sorry, it’s been a long night and that was probably too much information…”

“Oh. No, it’s okay,” she said with a disconcerted look as she pulled her closer and they began to dance again.

“I didn’t, like, freak you out or anything?” Felicity asked uncertainly.

“No, no…” she assured her. “What you said made perfect sense.”

“Really?”

Renee looked at her strangely, “Uh huh.”

“Okay,” Felicity said, getting back into the swing of things.

“So, what did you mean when you said you got ‘caught in the crossfire’ a few times?”
“Pretty much what it sounds like,” she told her.

She frowned, “Did you get shot?”

“Yup,” she said with a grin. She pulled back and pushed her hair to the side then moved the strap of her jumpsuit so she could see her faint scar. “See? It was just a .22 but it was still pretty awesome.”

“Shit,” the other woman said as she looked at it then moved her hair so she could see the exit wound scar on her back. “Huh,” she said almost to herself. “I guess I never realized how dangerous being a secretary was.” She shook her head then led her around the dance floor again.

“I wasn’t a secretary,” she corrected her. “I was an executive assistant.”

“What’s the difference?” Renee asked dubiously.

“Well, a secretary does mostly clerical work.”

“And?”

Felicity grimaced, “And an EA does that, plus they act as the executive’s stand-in during meetings or whenever necessary. Also, they have secretaries of their own, so…”

“You had your own secretary?” She asked.

“Um, sort of,” she said slowly. “Well, not officially, but I could have had one if I wanted one… theoretically.”

“So tell me again how you weren’t somebody’s secretary?”

She stopped and took a step back, “Okay, think of it like this; a meter maid and a detective are both cops, right? Theoretically, a detective could write a parking ticket if he wanted to but you wouldn’t send a meter maid out on a drug bust,” she said giving her a pointed look.

“Got it,” Renee nodded, pulling her back in her arms and turning them around on the dance floor. “Although, we don’t really call them ‘meter maids’ anymore; they’re called parking enforcement officers. The term ‘meter maid’ is considered sexist and also discriminatory since men can be parking enforcement as well.”

Felicity snorted, “God, why is it that all of you heroic types are complete pains in the ass?”

“How do you know I’m a heroic type?” Renee teased.

“Well, you were a cop, right? All the cops I know are heroes,” she said easily.

“Wish I could say the same thing,” she said in a muted tone before pulling back slightly once more, “What kind of charity was it you said you worked for again? I’ve worked with a few charities myself and I’ve never heard of any ‘Orbital Organization’ based here in Gotham.”

“It’s a pretty new facility,” Felicity told her. “What charities have you worked with?”

“Different ones,” she said ambiguously. “Mostly ones attached to the Wayne Foundation in some way. What kind of charity is Orbital?”

“I told you; we mostly target human-trafficking,” she said again with a frown.

“No, I meant what *kind* of ‘charity’?” Renee emphasized.
“I’m sorry?” She said, narrowing her eyes at her suspiciously.

“You know what? Never mind. It’s just…it’s a Gotham thing,” Renee said turning her around the dance floor. “Hey, give me your phone.”

She looked at her in confusion, “My phone?”

“Yeah, do you have your phone on you?”

“Um, yeah,” she reached into the pocket of her jumpsuit and handed it to her.

Renee typed in some digits and then the phone in her pocket rang. She handed Felicity back her phone before taking out her own and showing it to her, “There, now you have my number. You should call me sometime and we can talk more about charities, guns, saving the world; shit like that,” she said with a saucy grin.

“Sure,” Felicity shrugged putting her phone back in her pocket. The song ended and she looked around the room, “I wonder what’s taking Isabel so long?”

Hozier’s ‘Take Me to Church’ filled the air and Renee pulled her back into her arms with a wink, “Who cares? Her loss is my gain. Care to take another spin?”

Felicity laughed as Renee twirled her around then dipped her dramatically before falling into another slow dance.

“Excuse me, I believe that’s my date you’re dancing with.”

“Isabel!” Felicity said as she looked over Renee’s shoulder and noticed the cold and angry expression on the other woman’s face. She stepped away from Renee, “Um, Renee Montoya, Isabel Rochev.”

Renee nodded toward Isabel, her expression hardening slightly, “So you’re Felicity’s boss. She was just telling me about your organization.”

“Was she?” Isabel said, sweeping her eyes down Renee’s form contemptuously before turning to Felicity with a more pleasant expression in place, “I’m sorry but that phone call took longer than I expected. I hope you’ll forgive me for leaving you all alone in such,” she cut her eyes at the other woman again, “undesirable company. Still care to share that dance I promised you earlier?” She purred.

“Um, sure,” Felicity said uneasily. She turned to Renee, “Thanks for…” she smiled awkwardly.

“No problem,” she said easily, her eyes locked onto Isabel’s in an unspoken challenge before stepping aside. As Isabel placed her hand at the center of her back to lead her back into the dance, she added, “Don’t forget to call me sometime when you’re not busy, sweetheart. After all, you’ve got my number.”

Isabel pinned the other woman with a hard look, her grip tightening slightly on Felicity’s waist, “Renee Montoya, was it?”

“That’s right,” she confirmed.

Isabel offered her a cool look, “Perhaps we’ll meet again sometime.”

“Looking forward to it,” Renee nodded with equal menace.
“Let’s just dance, okay?” Felicity said uneasily as she tugged Isabel further onto the dance floor.

Isabel pulled her close as they spun around the room, offering one last spite filled look towards Renee who headed back to the bar. “You really should be more careful about the company you keep.”

“She was just being nice,” Felicity frowned. “Are you okay, Isabel? You seem a little…off.”

“I’m fine,” Isabel assured her, running her hand down Felicity’s exposed back and causing her to shiver uneasily. “Are you cold?”

“A little,” she lied. “What did Miranda want?”

Isabel grimaced, “She needs me to see to some Stellmoor business tomorrow so I have to fly out first thing in the morning.”

“Oh? Are you coming back in time for the mission?” She asked, watching the other woman’s expression carefully.

“Unfortunately no, probably not,” she sighed. “I need to head back to QC afterwards but I’ll be back in time for the gala, don’t worry,” she said brushing a piece of hair off her face. Felicity flushed causing her to break out in another shark-like grin, “I’m looking forward to that wrist corsage you promised me.”

“So do you guys want me to handle the op on my own tomorrow night?” She asked, ignoring the other woman’s not so subtle flirting. Between that and the weirdness between her and Renee it felt like she was so in over her head that she was drowning in crazy.

Either that or she’d crossed into the Twilight Zone.

“Miranda may be in to help; she mentioned she would try to be there if she could clear her schedule in time. However, I’m certain you can handle it on your own if need be,” she purred. “It is getting rather late though and I do have to fly out very early in the morning. I was thinking that perhaps we could go to my apartment for a nightcap? I have a nice bottle of **2004 Cune Rioja** somewhere. I was thinking we could enjoy it together? You don’t have to be in until later tomorrow evening so if you needed to stay over…” she let her voice trail off.

“I would but I’m pretty tired and, besides, I’m just not ready to…” She gave her an apologetic look while clamping down on her urge to bolt.

“No, no need to apologize,” Isabel said, allowing her fingers to dance over her lower back. “After all, you did say you were a girl who liked to take her time and I enjoy a challenge.”

“Yeah, great,” Felicity muttered.

They fell into silence as Isabel spun her around the room. She tried to relax and listen to the lyrics of the song as the deep moody notes filled the air but it wasn’t easy.

//If I'm a pagan of the good times
My lover's the sunlight
To keep the Goddess on my side
She demands a sacrifice//

Yeah, Felicity thought to herself, there was no way she was sacrificing her girl on girl virginity tonight, that’s for sure. Mission or no mission; that wasn’t happening. She’d gone from considering
letting her go to first base to calling the entire game on account of the fact that Isabel was freaking
her the fuck out.

“You know, I’m not normally a fan of this type of music but this has been quite an enjoyable
evening,” Isabel whispered into her ear. “We should make a regular thing of this.”

“Sure, yeah, that reminds me,” Felicity said pulling back. “You’ve had quite a few glasses of
champagne and, not that I think you’re impaired or anything, but maybe I should drive? You know,
just to be safe.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Very well,” Isabel said dismissively, “It’s a company car anyway. In fact,
you’re welcome to keep it. I noticed that you’ve been taking a cab to the facility. I’ll just use a car
service in the morning then lease another when I get back.”

“Are you sure?” The other woman nodded. “Great, well that’s one less thing on my to do list. Now
all I have to do is stop by the grocery store. Speaking of which,” she glanced at the clock on the wall
above the juke box, “it’s getting awfully late. Why don’t I drop you off at your building on my way
back to Orbital?”

She looked at her in confusion, “Why are you returning to Orbital at this time of night?”

“To pick up Laurel,” she told her. “I offered to let her stay in my guest room.”

“Why would you do that?” She asked her with slightly narrowed eyes.

Felicity shrugged, “Because Sara’s out of town and, even though you and Miranda think she’s okay,
I still want to keep an eye on her.”

“And that’s the only reason?” Isabel asked intently.

“Isn’t that enough?” She asked with a frown. “You guys want me to be the director. That means that
I have to be sure all of my operatives are cleared for duty and able to handle themselves. If Laurel
falls off the wagon or starts to spiral then I want to be able to catch it before she endangers the lives
of her team members.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Isabel said, pulling her closer once again. “However, I was under the
impression that you and she had a somewhat contentious relationship. Don’t you think that the fact
that you and Sara are no longer together may exacerbate the situation?”

“If it does then that just means she doesn’t need to be on the team,” Felicity pointed out. “I mean, I
can’t have anyone under me who can’t follow orders or respect my role as director. It’s bad enough
that Helena’s on the team; we can’t afford a second loose cannon, don’t you agree?”

“I do, yes,” the other woman said with a note of approval. “So why can’t she just take a cab to your
place?”

“I offered to call ahead to security or have my sister meet her but she wanted to stay and work out for
a while. Besides, I don’t think she’s comfortable being alone or with strangers just now.” Felicity
pursed her lips, “I’m going to keep her close until she settles in. I think she’s on the road to recovery;
I mean, she definitely seemed like she was trying, but I’d feel better if we waited before we send her
into the field.”

“You’re very compassionate,” Isabel told her. She ran her fingers down the back of her hair
teasingly. “I do wish I didn’t have to leave tomorrow. Now that I’ve had time to get to know you I’m
really not looking forward to leaving town without you.” Her eyes drifted towards Felicity’s lips, “I
see now why Oliver always kept you so close to him.” She touched the cut on her lip tenderly, “This looks very nearly healed, doesn’t it?”

Felicity broke away from Isabel with a tight smile, “You know what, Whole Foods closes soon and all I have at my place is some leftover soup and a deli tray. We should really get moving.”

“Of course,” she said, running her hand from her shoulder to her wrist. “Do you have your bag?”

“It’s um, behind the bar.”

Isabel glanced over to see Renee still looking at them. “I’ll get it,” she said in a hard tone before turning back to Felicity with a slight smile. She reached into her clutch for their valet ticket, “You go downstairs and get our coats and I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay.”

Felicity turned and headed down the stairs.

“I wonder if Isabel would believe me if I told her I don’t kiss on the first date? Of course, we’ve already got a second date planned and I really don’t want to kiss her then either. There better not be a third date because...crap, everyone knows what happens on the third date.” She tilted her head ruefully, "I even know what happens on the third date and I’ve never even been on a second date."

She was so screwed. Whole Foods better be open and they better have a shit load of Oreos on the shelf when she got there. That and chocolate; she had a feeling that Laurel was going to pretty much clean out the coffee and candy aisles.

All she wanted now was to end this ‘date’, get some groceries, then go home with her unexpected houseguest in tow. At least Isabel was going to be gone for a few days. Once she got home, she’d crawl into bed and everything would be fine; perfectly fine. And, best of all, no more unexpected surprises for a while. Well, at least until tomorrow anyway.

“Well, at least this day is almost over, right?” She murmured under her breath.

After all, what else could possibly go wrong?
Chapter Forty-Nine
Chapter Forty-Nine

Dropping off Isabel had not been fun.

Isabel, as it turned out, had more tentacles than an octopus when you got her good and liquored up. Had she been her type it definitely would have been a fun night but, as it was, she’d nearly run them off the road the first time the other woman tried to let her fingers do the walking in places that were definitely off limits.

After walking her up to the building because, by that point, those heels of hers were definitely a hazard, Isabel had given her a very long, very uncomfortable hug, before whispering a bunch of stuff
to her in Russian.

She’d never been happier to have a tin ear for languages than she’d been at that moment. She had a sinking feeling that, whatever it was that she was saying, it would have scarred her for life. She didn’t speak a lot of Russian, she’d only been there twice and both times for only a couple of days, but she could have sworn she heard the words for ‘honey’, ‘feathers’, and then something that sounded suspiciously like ‘toothpaste’. She wasn’t sure what all that added up to but she was pretty sure she wasn’t reciting her grocery list.

“Toothpaste,” she muttered out loud, “What the hell can you do with toothpaste?” She paused, “On second thought, I really don’t want to know.”

She sighed as she drove through Midtown traffic and turned up the music. One thing's for sure, Isabel had good taste in cars. Had she leased her own company vehicle she would have gotten something sensible like another Mini or a Honda, Isabel leased a fully loaded S-65 AMG sedan. Normally she’d feel awkward about driving something that expensive, but after the night she’d had, she’d earned it.

“At least it’s cheaper and more comfortable than the MacLaren,” she muttered as she hummed along to The Pretty Reckless and enjoyed the heated steering wheel against her icy cold hands as well as the heated seat against her equally frozen tushie. Then there were the heated windshield wipers that melted and removed the snow and ice effortlessly; now that was a bonus. She was definitely keeping this car. As much as she loved her Cooper, this was a really nice upgrade.

She looked out over the dirty, bleak landscape of the East End as the snow began to pile up and shivered despite the warmth of the car’s interior. She was going to have to get out and walk in that soon and she hated the cold like a cat hated flea baths.

She was *so* ready for summer it wasn’t even funny.

As she drove into Axis Chemical, the gates opened automatically without her having to access the keypad. Apparently, there was a RFID tracker on the car which made things pretty darn convenient considering that she didn’t want to have to roll down her window until it was absolutely necessary. Of course, that was also a glaring gap in their security, or a potential one anyway, but since they had snipers on the roof and masks in the basement (not to mention the fact that she wasn’t sure where Orbital fell on the food chain yet) she was going to let that one slide. She parked at the entrance of the main building in front of the small, two man secondary guard shack . The security guard glanced up from the multiple monitors showing the perimeter and gave her a curious look but didn’t say anything. The joys of being the boss, she thought. While she didn’t believe in being a Queen Bee like Isabel, as long as she was in charge and it was snowing, she wasn’t parking all the way in the back; not while wearing something as backless and frontless as what she had on under her coat.

She didn’t have a lot on top, but what she did have, she wanted to keep safe from frostbite.

Did she mention how over Gotham winters she was yet? She didn’t mind snow, white, clean, crisp snow, but there was *that* kind of snow, and then there was Gotham snow. Gotham snow wasn’t snow, it was frozen air pollution. She looked out at the soft haze of snow as it fell from the sky only to land in dirty gray snowdrifts and wrinkled her nose in distaste. Anyone who thought that counted as ‘snow’ had been making snow cream from something that tasted like diesel fumes for way too long.

As she undid her seatbelt, Felicity grabbed her phone only to have it slip between the console and the seat. “Damn it,” she cursed, shoving her hand down to the floorboard to retrieve it…
…only to encounter something rather unexpected.

She pulled out a small handgun and inspected it carefully. It was a Kimber CDP II with a beautifully polished rosewood grip. She released the slide, “.45 caliber hollow points; Isabel doesn’t play around,” she muttered before reloading the pistol.

It was a fairly expensive gun; she looked at one when Dig and Lance took her shopping for her own but, nice as it was, neither had anything good to say about that particular model. It was fine, but they both said it was overpriced and specifically marketed for concealed carry, and mostly to women. While it was plenty powerful, neither had liked the feel of it (short grip, perfect for a woman’s smaller hand) or the fact that it only had an eight shot capacity (one in the barrel and seven in the clip, not so practical for the kind of lives they led) so they discouraged her from buying one even though it was very pretty…well, for a gun.

She retrieved her phone then rolled down her window and waved over the guard.

“Ma’am,” he asked, reluctantly leaving the warmth of the shack.

“Hi, do you know who I am?” She asked him.

“Yes ma’am; Director Starling, ma’am,” he answered with military precision.

“No, that’s just…” Fuck it, she thought with a sigh. “Whatever, listen, Ms. Rochev left her sidearm in the car; if I bring this into Orbital is the elevator going to try to kill me?”

“Ma’am?” He asked in confusion.

“You know the laser net thing?” She asked him. “If I put this gun in my bag is it going to slice and dice me or set off an alarm and trap me in there or anything?”

He opened his mouth but instead of answering her right away he merely furrowed his brow in thought as he rubbed the back of his neck, “To tell you the truth, ma’am, I’m not even authorized to go in the elevator so I wouldn’t know. I will say that, other than Ms. Katana, most people check their weapons here at the secondary guard shack if that helps.”

“I really need to get a copy of the employee handbook,” she muttered. “Okay, how about this; I’m going to just leave it in my purse and give it to her the next time I see her but I don’t want to just leave it even though I’m pretty sure the hordes of Genghis Khan couldn’t get past those doors,” she paused to see if he understood the reference but got nothing. She sighed again, “Anyway, could I leave the car parked here so you can keep an eye on it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he told her.

“Great,” she said sticking it in her clutch. She moved to get out of the car then hesitated, “It’s really cold.”

“Yes, ma’am, it really is,” he said, still standing by the car and shivering slightly, his hands jammed inside his uniform jacket.

“No, I mean, I really hate getting cold and, you probably can’t tell, but under this trench coat I’m not wearing much,” his eyebrows lifted slightly and his handsome face broke into a flirtatious grin before she added, “No, I mean, I’m not naked or anything…well, a little naked—”

His blue eyes sparkled and he shot her a toothy grin.
“No, okay,” she took a centering breath, “Anyway, this car has heated seats.”

“I’m…happy for you, ma’am?” He said in confusion, his eyes drawing over her figure as if he were still trying to see how naked she was under her coat.

“No, see, when I get up there’s this safety feature that shuts off the heat, not to mention that when I get out with the fob thingie the whole car will shut off and it will get cold…” she took a breath, “Basically, would you mind sitting in the car until I come out?”

“You want me to sit in your car?” He said slowly.

“It’s got to be warmer than the guard shack,” she shrugged. “I assume your partner is in the golf cart checking out the perimeter so you don’t *have* to watch the monitors the whole time, right? Plus, there’s Wi-Fi and even a TV here in the dash, so you wouldn’t get bored. I mean, if you don’t want to, I understand, but I really don’t want to get back in a cold car. I know it sounds like I’m being a big--”

“I’ll do it,” he said quickly, holding the door open for her. He gave her a sheepish look, “To tell you the truth, I’ve…always been kind of curious about Ms. Rochev’s car,” he said with a nervous laugh. She got out and handed him the fob. “Does it really have a TV in there?” He asked curiously, peering inside. “I was hoping to catch a little of the game.”

“Right in the dash,” she told him as he sat down and bounced slightly on the seat.

“Damn, that is nice,” he muttered as he moved around a little in the seat. “Toasty.”

She pointed to the back seat, “Also, there’s two more monitors in the seat backs if that one doesn’t work; I haven’t messed with it, so I really don’t know the layout yet…or anything about the car really. I only got it less than twenty minutes ago so you’ll have to figure out how to work the TV and stuff on your own.”

“Got an owner’s manual?” He asked her eagerly.

“Yeah, try the glove compartment.” She watched as he pulled it out and began to flip through it then gave him a grateful smile. “Thanks for doing this, I won’t be long, I promise,” she said, already shivering from the cold.

“Take your time, ma’am,” he said absently, rolling up the window and waving her through as he began fiddling with the dash console.

She shivered in her coat as she walked into the elevator and kept reminding herself, ‘You’re almost home. Day’s almost over.’

It’s all smooth sailing from here on out.

She bent over the optical scanner and waited.

//Please stand by for entry code and scan.//

“Code Starling,” she said with a yawn.

//Identity Confirmed. Please stand by for scan.//

She blinked tiredly as the laser net skimmed over her body.

//Confirmed. Good Evening Director. Beginning descent.//
“You know, it’s bad when you’re so tired you can’t even get it up for a cool robot voice on an elevator. Laurel is definitely going to have to drive otherwise I’m sleeping on the couch in my office—Miranda’s office,” she paused, “Isabel’s office?” She wrinkled her nose, “Fuck it, it’s my office. She got a grope out of the deal, I should at least get a car and a couch.”

The elevator doors opened and that’s when she knew.

This day was never going to end.

“You son of a bitch! What the hell did you do to her!”

Felicity rushed in to see Wildcat with his hand wrapped around the neck of a man she’d never seen before and they were surrounded by a small group of techs, two women who looked like operators, and several well-armed women in full tactical gear with their guns at the ready. Laurel had a bo staff in hand, back to back with Wildcat and facing the crowd in a defensive stance as the other two women who appeared allied with them took up their own defensive positions.

“What the hell is going on now?” Felicity asked in frustration as she hurried over to the training area.

“Answer me! What the fuck did you do to Polly?” He growled, shaking him slightly as he clutched at his wrist, his toes barely skimming the ground as he turned blue.

“Wildcat!” Felicity roared and everyone turned toward her including the women surrounding them who were all dressed in dark tactical gear. “Let him go!”

The older man shook him one last time before he dropped him in an unceremonious heap, his teeth bared in anger as he pointed at him accusingly, “This piece of shit did something to Polly and I aim to find out what!”

The older bald man on the ground clutched at his throat and gasped for air as a man in a lab coat quickly helped him to his feet.

“Dr. Netz, are you alright?” The lab tech asked as he helped the older man up.

“No, I am not alright, you dorftrottel!” He snapped in a heavy German accent. “Zat drecksau assaulted me while you all stand around and do nothing!”

Wildcat started towards him again and Felicity put out her hand to stop him, “What’s going on? Who are you and who is Polly?”

“I do not answer to you!” The older man snapped at her.

Okay, she thought. “I’m the director of this facility so if you don’t answer to me then what are you doing in my building?”

“It is not your building; it is Miranda’s building,” he sneered at her, “and I do not know zis ‘Polly’; he is a madman!”

“That’s Polly!” Wildcat pointed at a statuesque raven haired woman standing near them. “He did something to her; I don’t know what, but something’s wrong with her!”

Felicity examined the woman in front of her carefully. The first thing she noticed was that she was freaking gorgeous; the kind of gorgeous that made you feel like a fat slob with bad acne and spinach in your teeth on your best day. The second thing she noticed was that she was tall, at least six foot, with long black curls that were so thick and shiny it looked like she just stepped out of a shampoo
And not the kind you buy at Target either; we’re taking that stuff in the late night infomercial with the chick from Charmed that costs like fifty bucks a bottle.

A small bottle. That she bought anyway along with a salad shooter and some kind of little convection oven that makes rotisserie chicken.

Damn, she has really got to start sleeping more and stop watching infomercials.

“Okay,” Felicity said, clearing her throat and hoping her nose wasn’t running from the cold or something equally atrocious. “Excuse me, but what--?”

“Do not speak to her!” Netz snapped.

“Hey!” A very muscular woman stepped forward and glared at him. “Watch your tone, you nasty little man, or things will become very unpleasant for you, very quickly!”

Felicity looked over at the tall, strapping woman dressed in a sports bra and leggings along with her companion, a Japanese woman, who was also dressed as if she’d been in the middle of a workout.

Both women were tall, the Asian woman standing at around 5’9”, and both had very well-defined muscles, but the woman who had spoken up had to be at least 7’0” if she was an inch and had arms that made Dig’s guns look like matchsticks.

Wow, Felicity thought as she looked up…way up, “Um, hi,” she said tentatively, “And you are?”

“Barda,” she told her, still giving the rude German man a dirty look. “And this is Sonia.”

“Hello,” she said in a heavily accented voice, her stance showing that she had her companion’s back. …not that she needed it.

Whoa mama.

“And are you with Dr. Nuts?”

“Netz!” He snapped.

“Whatever,” Felicity said, “Are you with Dr. Sunshine over here, or what?”

Barda took her gaze off Netz long enough to toss her an amused grin, “No, we sometimes go on assignments for Orbital and happened to be in town so we decided to get in a workout. So you are the new director?”

“Felicity Smoak-Fox,” she introduced herself. “But you can call me Felicity.”

“Barda Free, they call me ’Big Barda’,” she told her, shaking her hand firmly but gently; a remarkable feat considering her obvious strength.

Which was good because a crushed hand would really suck, especially after the day she’d had, “Big Barda, huh?” she said, rolling her neck slightly as looking up was beginning to give her a crick. “I can…see why.”

“Sonia Sato,” the other woman said with a smile, shaking her hand as well. “I am called ’Judomaster’. Do you have a handle, Ms. Fox?”
“It’s just Felicity and, yeah,” she flushed slightly. “Uh, it’s ‘Starling’ but you can just call me… Felicity.” She cleared her throat and turned back to the nasty Dr. Nutbag and Princess Polly Pantene, “Okay, now who are you again?” She said to the dark haired woman.

“She vill not talk to you!” Nutso said with a sneer. “She is a highly trained warrior and vill only speak--!”

“Diana,” she said, looking directly at Felicity.

“Vast ist?” The German man said in surprise as he rounded on the woman behind him. “How--?” Felicity rolled her eyes and ignored him, “Okay Diana, do you know who ‘Polly’ is? Could she be your sister or…?”

“I don’t know a Polly,” she said in a brisk almost mechanical tone even though her eyes were firmly fixed on hers.

“Vi are you answering her?” Nutsy asked angrily.

“Shut it Adolf, before I jack you up like a cheap ride,” Wildcat warned him in a growl before he stepped toward the woman calling herself ‘Diana’. “Polly’s real name was Hippolyta,” he corrected. “Hippolyta Prince.”

She didn’t answer him, her eyes still fixed on Felicity. She waited a moment before frowning, “Well?”

“Well what?” Diana asked in confusion.

Felicity grumbled in irritation. This was a seriously shitty day and she was way past sick and tired, “Do you know a woman named Hippolyta or Polly Prince?”

“My mother’s name is Hippolyta,” she said in that same military brisk tone.

“Her mother?” Laurel asked having wandered closer to their group. “Wildcat, when exactly did you meet ‘Polly’ because this woman has to be twenty-five or so.”

Wildcat looked slightly embarrassed as he shifted from one foot to the other, “Uh, World War II.”

“World War II?” Felicity asked slowly. At that point even Barda and Sonia were looking at him strangely. “And why exactly would you take one look at a woman in her mid- twenties and assume that she’s the same woman you met in the 1940’s?”

“She looks just like her for one,” he offered obstinately.

She counted to a slow ten, “Okay.”

“Look, Polly was kind of immortal like me,” he told her. “She never would tell me much about who she really was or where she came from, but she let slip a few times that she was a lot older than she looked.”

“Like how old?”

He gave her an uncomfortable look, “Like, when we were in bed together, she used to mention riding around in a…chariot kind of old.”

“She used ta call me her ‘beloved gladiator’ sometimes and say that I was better in the sack than Achilles…” he muttered. “Yeah, look, I know you don’t believe me,” he said defensively, “but I’m telling ya, she looks just like Polly! We were together for almost eight years when she suddenly just up and disappeared on me! I searched high and low for Polly after she took off, but couldn’t find hide nor hair of her until that woman walked through the door. That’s her!”

She nodded slowly, “And where, exactly, do you know her from?”

“From back when we was fighting Nazis in the Justice Society,” he told her.

“The Justice Society?” Laurel repeated curiously.

“Nazis?” Barda echoed. She turned to Sonia who shrugged helplessly.

“Nazis,” Felicity rubbed her hand over her eyes and prayed for strength, “Back in the 40’s, FDR founded a secret society of masks called the JSA to go after the Fourth Reich and Wildcat was a founding member. They were disbanded just before the Korean War,” she explained giving Wildcat a disgruntled look. “Wildcat, is there any chance you could just be mistaken?”

“Honey, I’m telling you, that’s Polly,” Wildcat said stubbornly. “That little weasel done somethin’ to her and that’s the reason she don’t remember me!”

She stared at him, long and hard for a moment, before muttering, “At what point in my life did this sort of conversation become normal?” Felicity ran her hand through her hair in aggravation, “Diana,” she said wearily rubbing the back of her neck as she turned to the woman standing in front of them. “Do you know where your mom is? Do you have her cell number or anything; maybe we could call her real quick and straighten this out?”

The woman looked at her in confusion, “My mother doesn’t have a ‘cell’ or any ‘numbers’. She is not a prisoner.”

“Not a prisoner, okay; land line?” She asked.

“No,” she said, her voice becoming more animated as they spoke. “No ‘land lines’; we do have nets though, for fishing.”

Felicity felt a vein in her forehead begin to pulsate, “English isn’t your first language is it?”

“No, Greek,” she told her.

“That explains it,” she murmured, “Did she ever mention a guy she used to date back in the day named ‘Ted’ or ‘Wildcat’?” She asked her.

“No, I’ve never heard those names,” she told her.

She glanced over at the stubborn set of Wildcat’s jaw and sighed, “Okay, did you have a grandmother named ‘Hippolyta’, as well? Maybe it’s a family name and you guys just have really great genes… and equally great bone structure?”

“I had no grandmother,” Diana said with a slight frown.

“Well, where is your mom now? Maybe Wildcat could drive over there or buy a plane ticket?” She asked in exasperation.

“Hippolyta is on Themyscira,” she told her. “The only planes that come there are from Man’s World,
and then only recently.”

“Man’s World? Wait, you’re telling me that you guys are actually from the mythological island of the Amazons?” Felicity said dubiously.

“Yes, Hippolyta is our queen.” She blinked, “Where--?” She started to look around, “I don’t understand what’s--?”

“Enough!” Netz spat, getting between her and Diana. “Go!” He ordered her, “You vill not speak again viz’out my authorization!”

As Diana stepped back, she turned towards the doctor. “Okay, let’s get back to that in a minute, how about you tell me what it is that you’re doing here?”

“I don’t answer--!”

“To me, got it,” she told him. “Here’s the thing, you will answer to me or you will leave this facility. Immediately.”

“You do not have ze authority!” He said imperiously.

“Director,” she said, pointing to her chest “so you can tell me what is going on right now, or you can get the hell out.”

“I do not tell you any’sing!” He said stubbornly. “I vill tell Miranda about zis and you vill be sorry!”

“Look Dr. Nietzsche--”

“Netz!” He shouted, nearly frothing at the mouth with anger.

“If you want take a run at Miranda and cry foul, be my guest,” she said, completely unmoved. “In the meantime, until I hear differently, this is my show, her words, and she certainly didn’t mention a Dr. *Netz*!”

“My name is not ‘Netz’ it’s--!” He stopped. “My name is Netz!”

“I said ‘Netz’,,” she told him with raised eyebrows.

“You—you--!” His face turned red with frustration, “I could order zem to kill you vhere you stand, you stupid fotze!”

“That right there was the line and you just crossed it, Adolf,” Wildcat said stepping forward and knocking him out cold with a single punch. He stared down at his crumpled form with blood in his eye, “I speak German, too, you schwanzlutscher.” He looked around at Netz’s techs who had backed up several steps, “Anybody else want to say something to the lady? Because if one more asshole opens his goddamn pie hole er wird gekackt werden Zähne!”

“No sir,” the one who had helped Netz up earlier said nervously.

Felicity turned to Wildcat, “I don’t want to know what he called me, do I?”

“Only if you want a good enough reason to kick his ass, too,” he answered in a low growl.

“Tempting,” she said wryly. She turned to the now very nervous tech in the lab coat. “What’s your name?”
“Perreira, ma’am,” he said quickly. “Adam Perreira; I’m just taking blood draws.” He glanced down at Netz then back at Wildcat and swallowed, “I’m new. Very new. Extremely…new.”

“Okay, Adam, what can you tell me about this little operation of yours?” She asked.

“We don’t know anything,” a blonde woman said, stepping up beside him.

She looked at her carefully, “And you are?”

“Dr. Mira Girani, and this is Dr. Daniel Okuna,” she said as the other man in a lab coat, a tall Asian man of mixed heritage, stepped up beside her. “I’m Dr. Okuna’s partner in the free clinic Orbital funds here in the East End. We’re just here to help collect blood samples and run the soldiers through their stress tests.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Okuna told her. “Orbital hired us to just run panels and assist Dr. Netz with vaccinations. Adam actually works at our clinic here in Gotham as a physician’s assistant and lab technician. We’re only called in whenever Netz brings in the new operators or whenever an emergency comes up.”

“Yeah, like bullet wounds, stitches, broken…bones…” Adam gestured to the still unconscious man on the floor, “Um, I know that you guys have a lot to talk about, but shouldn’t we check to see if he’s still breathing?”

“He’s breathing,” Wildcat grumbled in a way that made it seem that that wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

“Could someone please help Drs. Okuna and Girani with Netz by taking him to the med area, please?” She asked wearily.

“I’ll help you with the rude little German man,” Barda said, lifting him up effortlessly and moving him to a gurney.

As the two physicians moved away, she turned to Adam, “So you don’t know anything? Anything at all?”

“No,” he said quickly. “We’re not even allowed to talk to the soldiers. In fact, the only one who ever talks to them is Dr. Netz or that other guy who brings them in sometimes.”

“Other guy?” Sonia asked curiously. “Who? We’ve only seen you three and Netz in here tonight.”

He hitched his thumb at the door, “His assistant. Smelly dumb guy; looks like a grown up version of a Garbage Pail Kid. I think he’s up on the roof with the--”

“What the hell?” A slovenly looking man came barreling through the door followed by several more of the tall women dressed in full tactical gear. “What happened to Netz? What the hell is going on here?”

“Who are you?” Felicity asked, suddenly feeling another headache coming on.

She had to say it, didn’t she? ‘What else could possibly go wrong?’ she said.

Tangy butt nuggets meet oscillating air circulation device, indeed.

As he drew closer it was made very apparent that, in addition to a bath, he was also in need of a breath mint, “Who the fuck are you?” He threw back.
Faster than she could blink, Sonia grabbed him by the throat and slammed him forcefully against the wall.

“I think you should be more polite when speaking to a lady,” she told him in a dangerous growl.

“K-kill them,” he gasped out.

Suddenly all the women in tactical gear raised their weapons as one and her team instantly went into defensive mode while the medical staff all ran for cover.

At the end of her rope, and without even thinking about it, Felicity brought out the Loud Voice.

“Enough!” She shouted so loud it made her ears ring.

Everyone froze including the women pointing their weapons at her. Every eye centered on her and she took a deep breath as she tried to get her temper back under control, “This has been a very long, very *fucked up* day and I’m done!” She told them. “Everyone drop your weapons! Now!”

The women all blinked and lowered their weapons before releasing them with a clatter.

Sonia released the odious man’s throat and half pushed, half threw him onto the floor at Felicity’s feet, “W-what’s happening?” He said nervously as he scrambled away, crab-like.

“That seems to be the question of the hour,” Felicity said using a voice that would do both Oliver and Bruce proud. She eyed the man in front of her darkly, “Who are you and what are you doing in my facility?”

“Answer her, pig,” Barda said from behind him, causing the man to half jump out of his skin.

“Johnny Valentine,” he told her, looking around in fear.

“Some Valentine,” Wildcat muttered. “Smells like he crawled out of a sewer.”

“I want to know what you and Dr. Nasty are doing here,” she told him.

“It’s classified,” he told her with a slight edge of defiance.

“Really?” Wildcat asked, advancing on him slightly. “And how many bones in your body do I have to break until it’s declassified?”

“Do not answer him!” Netz said, scrambling off the gurney unsteadily and marching toward him on rubbery knees.

“Ready for round two, Nutsy?” Wildcat said threateningly.

“You stay away from me, sie gewalttätige wilde!” He told him. “Only Miranda may grant us ze authorization to speak!”

“Fine,” Felicity snapped. “Watch them,” she told the rest of the team. “If either one of them tries anything, you have my permission to get medieval.” She made sure to give Pig Boy a hard look as she spoke.

“Honey, have I ever mentioned how much it turns me on when you get pissed?” Wildcat asked her with a bloodthirsty grin.

“A couple of times, yeah,” she answered grimly.
“What about them?” Laurel asked, still gripping her staff warily as she indicated the ‘Amazons’ who were still standing at alert although none of them had reached for their weapons again.

She looked at Diana, “What about you? What are you doing here? What are your orders?”

“I don’t know, they haven’t given me any orders yet,” the woman said in that same brisk tone she used earlier.

“What about you?” She asked the blond woman behind her who was also dressed like one of the ‘in-house’ operators. “What are the details of your mission? Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” she answered promptly. “They haven’t given us any orders.”

“Anyone?” She called out. When no one answered she cursed, “Should have just gone straight home. All I wanted was a goddamn Oreo and my pillow but, no, I just had to come back here.” She looked over at Laurel, “You owe me big time.”

“Sorry,” she said sheepishly.

She narrowed her eyes, “You do know you’re driving, right? I’ve had less than four hours of sleep in more than forty-eight hours and there’s no way we’re getting a cab out here this time of night. I’m telling you right now that I’m not in the mood to deal with Midtown traffic on top of everything else; not after this bullshit!”

“I don’t have a license, remember?” She said with a wince.

“You don’t have a license?” Wildcat asked her with a frown.

“Suspended due to a DUI,” she told him with a small shrug. “I was supposed to get it back a while ago but I would’ve tested positive before my hearing so I blew it off. It’s one of the reasons why I chose to go into a ninety day program after I fell off the wagon. I can get it back in three more months, as long as I stay sober this time.”

“I could drive you but my back seat is full of equipment. I was planning on stopping by my gym later to drop it off,” Wildcat told her with a hint of apology.

“You could take my car,” she told him.

“You really don’t want me parking something nice in my neighborhood,” he told her. “The only reason no one goes after my ride is because they know I’ll bust their asses.”

Barda and Sonia exchanged looks that screamed ‘What the hell?’

Frankly, she couldn’t blame them. They were surrounded by highly trained snipers while shooting the shit like this was their normal.

The fact that they had clearly established this *was* their normal with the ‘Nazi’ discussion earlier probably didn’t help matters any.

“Fine.” She took a centering breath and cast her eyes over the two dozen or so women surrounding them. “Okay, my name is Felicity Smoak-Fox and I’m the director of the Gotham branch of the OO. This is my facility and, until Miranda says otherwise, I’m in charge. As long as you play nice, so will we. That said, if you attempt to hurt a member of my team there will be consequences,” she eyed them all harshly. “Either stand at ease or leave this facility now, but no one is to pick up their weapons until after I speak to Miranda, understood?”
“Yes, Ma’am,” they all said in perfect unison before falling into an at ease stance.

“How is she doing that?” Pig boy asked Netz in a whiny voice.

“Shut up, Sohn eines Schweine!” The old man snapped at him as he rubbed his swollen and badly bruised jaw.

“Doing what?” She asked him in exasperation.

“T-tha--!” He started as he began to point at the operators then flinched as Netz cuffed him on the back of the head.

“Ve do not talk except to Miranda!” He told her.

“I heard you already,” she grumbled then turned around to see a young dark complexioned woman peeking warily out of Cyber-Ops. “Hey, what’s your name?”

“Uh, Alice?” She said with a start as Felicity marched toward her.

“Get Miranda on the line, now,” she told her.

“Yes ma’am,” she said quickly as she scrambled into her chair in front of her workstation.

“It’s my first day and I already miss being an EA,” Felicity muttered darkly.

Oliver looked through the night vision binoculars as the silver sedan they’d identified earlier as Isabel’s drove into Orbital. “Isabel’s back.”

/I got her./ Dick said from his post. //Looks like she’s waving a guard over.//

They watched for a moment as she had a conversation with the guard through her open window.

//What the hell is she doing back there at this time of night and why is she in Isabel Rochev’s car?//

He paused, //Wait, why is the security guard getting in the car now?//

Despite himself, Oliver felt a tiny spark of amusement as he watched them switch places, “She’s getting him to stay in her car so she can keep it warm.”

//What?// He asked incredulously.

“Felicity hates getting in a cold car so she used to keep it running for a few minutes before getting into it on cold nights when we would stay late in the foundry. She nearly had it stolen once by a couple of drunk kids coming out of the club, so Lance installed a remote start kit on her car that way she could warm it up by pressing a button on her security fob without leaving her keys inside.”

//She got the cop who works with you to work on her car?//

“Actually she got him to do that before he was ever officially read in, but yeah. I even think he changed her oil a few times.” Oliver said wryly. “I know she said he fixed a leak under her sink for sure.”

//Wait, so she managed to get the cop who was at one time hunting you to act as a shade tree
mechanic/handyman for her *before* he was read in?// He asked incredulously. //Weren’t you, I don’t know, concerned that he was getting a little too close?//

“I was,” he said with a hint of remembered annoyance, “but Felicity has a way of getting people to do things they wouldn’t normally do. Plus, I’d rather have Lance turning wrenches for her than have Roy babysit it so it didn’t get stolen again.”

//Sounds like Baby, alright,// the other man conceded ruefully.

He watched as she entered the building and magnified the focus until he could see her clearly. She looked exhausted even from a distance. There was a lack of animation to her face and her shoulders were hunched from the cold, “Why would she go back this late at night?”

//Still prime hunting hours for masks; it’s not even eleven o’clock yet.// Dick pointed out. //Besides, she’ll be coming out soon, right? Otherwise she wouldn’t have left the car running.//

“True,” he said, “After she leaves I’m going to go back to Isabel’s building and check out her apartment; see what we can find.”

//I’m pretty decent at hacking a keypad and fairly handy with a lock pick so I’ll join you.//

“I suppose you guys are the ones who taught her to pick locks, huh?” Oliver asked, taking the opportunity to get one of the many questions he’d had about his IT girl over the years finally answered.

//Well, Baby was always good at decrypting systems and hacking but actually rolling tumblers? Yeah, that was us; more specifically, it was Tim. Selina taught Tim, Tim taught Tam, and Tam taught Baby. She pick a lot of locks for you guys?//

The question was asked casually but Oliver could hear the slight edge of protectiveness that Felicity tended to bring out in the people closest to her, “I don’t often let her in the field but, on occasion, yes. She mostly works with tech though. The first time we saw her pick a lock and asked where she learned it from all she’d say was ‘misspent youth’. I will say that after that, Roy started looking at her with a hell of a lot more respect. Who’s Selina?”

//One of Bruce’s exes,// he said guardedly. //Bet you guys had a few questions about her life before the mission; she ever mention any of us?//

“We never pressed Felicity for the details,” he told him. “Even if we had, she wouldn’t have said anything. We never even knew Lucius was her father until a few weeks ago and, if all this hadn’t happened, I doubt she ever would have told us.”

//Baby always was a strange mix of quiet and rambles,// the other man said dryly. //She has a way of making you feel like she’s talking your ear off without ever really saying anything, y’know?//

A slight bit of irritation came over him, “You’re not the first person to point that out. Can I ask you something?”

//Shoot.//

“What was Felicity like before she left Gotham?”

//What do you mean?//

“I mean that if you had asked me a few weeks ago who Felicity Smoak was I would’ve known how
to answer you, but now…” he grimaced.

He heard the other man take a deep breath, //Baby was…brilliant. And by ‘brilliant’ I don’t just mean smart, I mean she glowed. She made you smile just by being there. Not only that, but she was always so quiet. She rambled when she was nervous, sure, but… she was always so centered and calm, you know? Sometimes she’d be so quiet you’d forget she was even there, and then suddenly she was and she’d fill your whole world up with her presence.// He chuckled, //She had a way of making you feel like the most important person in the room; it was like when she was focused on you, everything else just melted away. I don’t know if that makes a whole lot of sense, but…//

“No, makes perfect sense,” he said quietly.

He paused, //So what’s the deal with you and Baby anyway? I’ve been sitting here with you for half the night trying to get a fix on her place in your team’s dynamic and I can’t figure it out.//

“She is the team,” he said succinctly. It was the truth.

//What happened?// He asked. //Bruce didn’t tell me much; just that Baby got in over her head over something on your end and came down here; now she’s in a building surrounded by snipers. I’ve known Baby since she was a kid and I’m having a hard time piecing all this together.//

“Tell you the truth, I don’t think any of us know what’s going on yet but I’m here to bring her back home.”

//That…doesn’t really answer my question.//

“Best I can do,” he told him. “All I know is that this Orbital group is bringing in people from both our teams and they’ve targeted Felicity. As soon as I get her somewhere safe I’ll deal with them but she’s my priority right now.”

//What exactly is your relationship with Felicity? Is she just your tech or…?//

He considered deflecting but answered him anyway, “I love her, she loves me, and she belongs in Starling; is that what you wanted to hear?”

There was another brief pause before Dick’s voice came back over the coms, //You do know that Bruce asked her to marry him right?//

“Doesn’t mean she’s going to.”

//Okay.// Dick said slowly.

“Glad you’re good,” Oliver said with a touch of sarcasm. He noticed something happening on the roofline, “I’ve got movement.”

//Got it,// he confirmed. //Looks like the sentries are headed down but…//

“But what?”

//All day long they’ve switched out sentries like clockwork; every four hours they switch up, but I’m not seeing any relief sentries, are you?//

“No.”

//Why would they all be heading into the building and abandoning their posts?//
A heavy feeling of foreboding came over him, “I don’t know.”

“I really wish she’d get the hell out of there.”

“You and me both,” Oliver muttered.

Suddenly, a loud crack of thunder filled the air causing Oliver to jump slightly. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and not from the cold; he hadn’t heard thunder that loud since the confrontation with Slade. If he didn’t know any better he’d think it was an explosion. He searched the skies as it continued to roll angrily.

“What the hell?” Dick said in alarm.

“Coming from the West Coast, I’m not all that familiar with sitting on a rooftop during a snowstorm, but does it normally thunder like that?” He asked, looking up at the haze of snow clouds as they floated past the small sliver of light that was being given off by the new moon.

“Not often and never that loud,” he said in confusion. “Now I really do hope Baby gets out of there soon; I’m not looking forward to being out here if this storm picks up.”

“We need to get in there,” Oliver said grimly.

“You tell me how and I’ll be happy to.”

Oliver scratched at the stubble on his throat in agitation, “There has to be a hole in their defenses somewhere; no system is completely impenetrable. Felicity didn’t even have to enter a passcode when she entered the gates and neither did Isabel earlier; I’m thinking RFID. We could exploit that fairly easily if we had the right equipment.”

“Sure, but even with the RFID hack—which I could do with what I’ve got on me, the sentries out of the picture, and taking out the perimeter guards, according to what Baby told Bruce, the elevators require an optical scan, a vocal passcode, and then a full body scan. There’s no way in; if there was, trust me, we would’ve crashed the party by now.” The other man waited a moment then made a disgruntled noise, “Fuck it. Tell you what, if Baby isn’t out of there in the next ten minutes, I say we do something real goddamn stupid; what do you say?”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Oliver agreed as he hunkered down in the shadows and waited.

//Felicity?// Miranda asked from the monitor, “What are you still doing in Orbital at this hour? Has there been a complication with the mission that I’m not aware of?”

Felicity looked at the woman on the screen and again wanted to crawl away in shame. Even this late at night the woman was stunning. She could definitely give Princess Pantene a run for her money with her long dark hair, slightly almond shaped eyes, and exotic good looks that seemed to defy being pigeonholed into any particular ethnicity. She could be anything from Asian to black Irish, and since Felicity felt about two steps away from being a member of the walking dead as it was, seeing her perfectly coifed and dressed at this late hour wasn’t doing much for her self-esteem.

“Not that I know of, no,” she told her. “I was just dropping by and walked in to a, well, let’s just say I met Dr. Netz and we really didn’t hit it off,” she told her.

//Dr. Netz,// Miranda said neutrally even though her eyes were already glancing over her shoulder toward the group of black clad operatives that were standing at ease in the training area behind her.
“Not much,” she said off-handedly. She was tired and pissed off, not a good combination for her. It tended to make her very sarcastic. Plus, the good thing about being rich is never having to worry about job security so she decided to just let her bitch flag fly, “Well, a few things happened; Lois Lane was zapped by some hinky HIVE mind wipe, I went to dinner and got groped by Isabel, found out that you guys were either connected to HIVE or investigating them, finally met the Amazons, was called something really nasty in German, and had both Netz and his pig-boy give these secret troops of yours the go ahead to shoot me, but other than that …”

//Wait, what?// Miranda said angrily, her perfectly sculpted brows drawing together. //Back up; Netz tried to kill you?//

She had to give Miranda credit, of all the things she could have latched onto first, the bit about Dr. Nutsy ordering her to be ventilated with extreme prejudice…yeah, that was a definite check mark in the ‘good guy’ vs ‘bad guy’ column. Plus she genuinely looked pissed off about it which helped her cause. “Yep, can’t say this has been the best first day on the job I’ve ever had.”

//Where is he?// She demanded.

“I’ve got my people watching him and I managed to get the nice ladies with the sniper rifles and machine guns to agree to stand down until you and I had time to talk,” she told her.

//You gave the order and told them to stand down?// Miranda said slowly.

“Uh huh, speaking of which, what’s with the Amazons and what’s really going on here?”

Miranda’s mouth tightened in aggravation and she blew out a frustrated breath, //It’s an op, one I can’t talk about with you over coms. How did you find out about it to begin with?//

“Different sources, but most of it was Isabel,” she told her honestly…semi-honestly.

Right or wrong though, she had no qualms about tossing Isabel under the bus. In fact, truth be told, she was kind of curious to see what would happen if she exploited the bit of acrimony she sensed was brewing between the two women. Isabel wasn’t a team player and it was clear that she wasn’t thrilled to be working under Miranda, and something told her that Miranda was the type of woman who expected her orders to be followed and didn’t have a lot of patience with those who chose to ignore them.

Besides, watching the ensuing fireworks when those two met up again after this might be kind of entertaining.

//She shouldn’t have said anything,// she said and, once again, Felicity caught the flash of anger in her eyes.

“Yeah, well she did and, between that and Herr Nut-bag out there, I think you’d better read me in and tell me what exactly is going on here,” she told her.

//I can’t do that,/// Miranda told her. //Not now, anyway.//

“Well, when can you talk about it? Because while I appreciate the job offer, I don’t work with people I don’t trust and after being threatened not once, but twice, by two men who both claim to answer directly to you, I’m not feeling particularly trusting at the moment,” she told her flatly.

The other woman’s eyes sparked with anger as well as frustration, //For reasons I’m sure you can
understand, there are things I simply cannot loop you in on. All I can tell you is that this is an ongoing op and--/

“Not good enough,” she cut her off. “Tell you what; I’m done.” It wasn’t a bluff, she was done with bullshitting for the night. Months of insomnia and years of living under pressure had turned her from a sweet happy-go-lucky girl next door type to the kind of woman who was two seconds from saying ‘fuck it’ and burning the world down. Besides, Miranda wanted her and the others here for some reason; it was time to see just how she’d react if one of them threatened to walk. “If you can’t loop me in then you hired the wrong girl,” she told her bluntly. “I don’t do well with secrets, Miranda; not within my own team. Been there, done that, own the t-shirt. If you can’t trust me enough to tell me why I’m here then I need to take myself out of the game. Thanks for the shot but I’m afraid I’m--”

//Fine!/ She growled in frustration. //You win.//

That was fast, she thought. “And what exactly is it that I win?”

Her eyes grew cold, //I’ll be there tomorrow; we’ll talk then.//

“And you’ll tell me exactly what’s going on?” She asked her. “What the deal is with the Amazons, the connection between Orbital and HIVE, why you’re bringing in both Bat and Arrow team friendlies…?”

//I’ll tell you everything,// she promised, //But only if I can be assured of the fact that you’re 100% invested in Orbital. That means you are accepting the position and all that entails; no ‘trial period’, no ‘wait and see’, you’re in.//

“Fine,” she told her, “now what are you going to do about Netz because, apparently, he’ll only talk to you and I really don’t want to get shot tonight.”

//Send him in,// she told her.

“Alice, go get the Nutty Professor,” she told the girl at the work station.

“Yes, Director Starling,” the girl said quickly as she sprang up and went into the training area.

“My name isn’t…” Felicity began then shook her head, “Screw it.”

//Starling?// Miranda asked, giving her a strange look.

“I had to come up with a handle and it’s the only thing I could think of,” she said with a grimace.

The other woman nodded but continued to watch her as though she were assessing her carefully. This was a new side of Miranda. The woman she had met before was charming, professional, confident; this Miranda was far colder and more cutting than the woman she’d initially appeared to be and Felicity had the feeling that she was finally seeing the real woman behind the mask.

“Miranda,” Netz said, tossing Felicity a filthy look, “Zis Blöde Fotze dared to--!”

//You will watch how you speak about my director, Netz!// Miranda snapped at him. //Unlike her, you’re expendable.//

The old man faltered slightly and looked at Miranda in confusion, “But she had one of her men--!”

//Did you or did you not order your operatives to open fire on my personnel?// She demanded.

“I vas defending myself!” He stammered. “She demanded to know about ze operation and--”
The other woman gave him a look that made even her blood run cold, //Ms. Smoak-Fox is the director of that facility and *if* she ordered her people to do anything I do not doubt that she had good reason for it.// She allowed her words to sink in before addressing him again, //Take all of the operatives under your command and leave the facility immediately for the rendezvous point. I expect you to be wheels up in less than an hour. And should you ever find yourself again in Ms. Smoak-Fox’s presence, you will treat her with the same deference and respect that you would accord me or you will no longer be in my employ. Dismissed.//

Netz looked between Miranda and herself before finally stomping off into the training area where he began to bark out orders to his operatives without so much as a by your leave.

Miranda looked to her again, some of the anger leaving her expression, //I’m out of the country at the moment but I’ll be there by tomorrow evening. I suggest you not come in until late yourself as the op begins at 2400 hours and will, most likely, take most of the night. We’ll talk afterwards.//

“Understood,” Felicity said, moving to end the transmission.

//And Felicity?// she said, stopping her. She looked up curiously, //Your new handle really does suit you now that I think about it.//

“Thanks,” she said with a frown. “Weird question; why?”

//Starlings are survivors,// she said, just before ending the transmission.

Felicity walked slowly back into the training area, her mind going back over everything. The fact that something was going on was indisputable, but what? Somehow Orbital was linked to HIVE but…

Ah, this is so frickin’ frustrating, she thought. She was used to being able to assess other people through their body language and mannerisms but Miranda was a harder read than most. Some things she got easily enough, but beyond the obvious, the other woman was a closed book.

She knew Miranda was planning something big and the sense she got was that it was happening soon. She knew that the other woman didn’t want to cave but she folded the minute she threatened to leave so she obviously needed her for some reason. She knew Miranda was frustrated with Isabel and, from what Isabel let slip, it had to do with the Miller thing. Other than that she had nothing. Would Miranda follow through and give her some answers? Maybe.

She closed her eyes and nearly swayed on her feet. She needed to get some sleep, real sleep. She’d nearly gone to the doctor a few months ago for a sleep aid but that just meant she wouldn’t be able to wake up if she needed to and that wasn’t a risk she was willing to take. The most sleep she’d gotten in months was with Bruce in the penthouse but he was bound to be full of questions when she got home, not to mention pissed over her inviting Laurel to stay over. On one hand, Bruce had become her security blanket of sorts; as long as he was there she didn’t seem to have the nightmares that practically kept her on a caffeine drip these last six months. On the other hand, he caused as much sleeplessness as he cured and tonight she just wasn’t in the mood for dealing with a pissy bat. Maybe she would see Dr. Schwartz tomorrow while she had the chance and ask for something because she needed sleep and tonight she had a feeling that she missed something because she was too damn tired and cranky to get her head on straight.

She looked at her team, all of whom had worried expressions on their faces, “Okay, what did I miss now?”
“Nutsy left,” Wildcat told her. “He took all of the snipers and in house operators with him.”

“Miranda told him to,” she said stifling a yawn.

“No,” Sonia told her, “He took all of the operators; including the roof sentries.”

“What?” she asked in confusion.

“All of them,” Laurel said meaningfully.

“Son of a bitch!” Felicity growled, she turned to the girl still watching them warily from Cyber Ops, “Alice, have security detain Netz!”

“Too late, Ma’am,” she said as Felicity stomped back up to her workstation. Felicity watched the video feeds as Netz instructed all two dozen of the black suited operatives to get into some armored vans.

“Right before Netz left he said to tell you to say hello to the League when they rain hell down upon you,” Barda told her then snorted, “I only had to give him a hard look and he practically ran out of here with his tail tucked between his legs.”

“What do you want to do?” Laurel asked quietly as she came to stand beside her.

Felicity blew out a harsh breath, “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Sonia asked in confusion.

“There’s nothing we can do,” she shrugged. “Hopefully the tech will keep the perimeter secure but, if not, there’s nothing we can do about it.” She turned to the girl beside her who was seated at the nearest console, “Transfer any coms to another facility and then you can go. No sense in staying here by yourself.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she told her quietly.

She turned her head slightly toward Alice then stopped. There was a slight shimmer around her that made her eyes go funny.

“Are you alright?” Alice asked as Felicity rubbed her eyes.

“Just tired,” she told her. She opened her eyes and nearly jumped out of her skin. For a split second she saw…

She blinked.

“You okay, honey?” Wildcat asked, frowning at her.

“I’m fine,” she said shaking off the weird image. “Lack of sleep combined with absinthe is apparently not a good combination for me.”

Talk about seeing the green fairy. For just a split-second she could have sworn that a tall green skinned man was sitting at the workstation instead of the pretty young African American woman.

“Absinthe, huh?” Wildcat grinned. “Damn, I haven’t had that stuff since I was stationed in Paris during the war. Good times.”

“Yeah, well, I only had a few sips but I’m pretty sure I’m going to be sticking to wine from here on
“Out,” she said dryly. “Alice, you should go as soon as the transfer is complete. It was snowing pretty hard and you don’t want to get stuck.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” she said as she began to type at the console.

Felicity followed the others out of the control room, “If you guys want to go I can just stay here on the couch tonight.”

“And do what, honey?” Wildcat snorted. “No offense, but you look like shit.”

“Thank you for that,” she said dryly.

“I mean, I’d still sleep with you in a heartbeat, but…”

“Again, thanks,” she repeated, giving the older man another dirty look.

“There’s a crib over near the break area; if you like, Sonia and I could stay and secure the facility?” Barda offered.

“We could take shifts,” Sonia nodded. “Besides, as Barda said, we are here to work even if that means acting as guardians to this facility.”

“Thanks,” she said, not even bothering to argue with them. “I really doubt anything is going to happen but it wouldn’t be a bad idea.” She looked around, “Where are the two doctors and their assistant?”

“They left right after you went to talk to Miranda,” Sonia offered. “I think they had enough guns pointed at them for the night.”

“They weren’t the only ones,” Laurel said ruefully. “Are you going to call Miranda back and tell her what Netz did?”

“Nope,” Felicity said with a crooked smile. “He’s right, she told him to leave and take his operators with him.”

“Surely she couldn’t mean for him to take all of them,” the Asian woman said with a frown.

“Maybe, but I doubt it.”

Wildcat have her a measured look, “Meaning?”

“Meaning that as long as they aren’t here, I can’t question them further and she knows it.” She bent her head thoughtfully, “As a result of what happened tonight, I somehow doubt that we’ll be seeing any more of our Amazon friends for a while.”

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“Hey Mike!” Wildcat called out to the security officer who was still sitting in her car.

“Oh, hey,” the fair-haired security guard said as he got out of the back seat with his buddy who was wearing a discomfited expression.

“Oh, um, Director Starling,” the other uniformed man said, as he emerged from the other side.

“My name’s not ‘Director Starling’,” she told him. “It’s Director Smoak, or Fox, or Smoak-Fox, or better yet, ‘Felicity’; not ‘Starling’.”
“Sorry about that, Director, uh, yeah. Anyway, Booster said you wouldn’t mind if we caught the
game in your car,” he said, pointing to the sedan nervously.

“Booster?” Felicity asked curiously.

“Oh yeah,” Wildcat said as he led both Felicity and Laurel up to the two uniformed security guards.
“Mike Carter, also known as ‘Booster’ because he used to play football back in the day, and this is
Ted Kord. They usually work nights here at Orbital.”


“Yeah,” the tall, thin, dark blond man said as he shifted awkwardly.

“And you’re working as a night security guard?”

“Well, to be fair, we’re a little more than just security guards,” Booster offered in a slightly puffed up
manner.

“Yeah,” Ted agreed. “We’re sort of like undercover masks ourselves…in a way. We have…guns,”
he said, patting his sidearm, “and, um, can do stuff. A lot of stuff.”

Booster nodded. “Yeah, I mean, I was working with ARGUS R&D before the cutbacks and Ted
here was with Kord and Lexcorp’s tech divisions before he got, um…” he looked at his partner
guiltily.

“Fired,” he supplied flatly. “Not to mention Wayne, Palmer, ARGUS,” he hitched a thumb at his
companion, “STAR Labs, and OMAC.”

“Why’d you leave them?” Laurel frowned.

“Fired,” he and Booster said together.

Felicity huddled deeper into her coat as she looked from one man to the other, “Still, why are you
guys working the perimeter? Shouldn’t you be inside the building or working for Stellmoor?”

“I was…” Ted said sheepishly.

“Uh, yeah, me too,” Booster offered as well. “Stellmoor hired both of us around the same time.
Before this we were both working in Special Projects in the Weapon’s Tech division at one of their
subsidiaries, a place called GothCorp.”

“So what happened?” Laurel asked them.

“Nothing much…” Booster shrugged.

“It was just a…little explosion,” Ted murmured. “Very minor.”

“Pretty minor,” Booster mumbled.

“Fairly…minor. It was supposed to be a gag.”

“Apparently Ms. Rochev doesn’t have a very forgiving nature,” Booster said dourly.

“It was this or unemployment,” Ted shrugged. “Since my Uncle Ted cut me off, well, there’s not a
whole lot of places left that are hiring ex-billionaire geniuses, you know? Especially ones with
degrees in Physics, English Lit, and Theoretical Mathematics but who’ve managed to get fired by
every company they’ve ever worked for including their own.” He sighed, “Twice.” His brow
furrowed, “Well, three times but I don’t think having your family sell the company rather than let you
run it should count as being ‘fired’.”

“Plus, it’s kind of impossible to put ‘ARGUS’ on a résumé much less explain that your last job
involved cataloguing alien artifacts and developing theoretical weapons applications,” Booster
offered. “The only other thing I’ve got is some college football and a stint as a security guard at the
Metropolis Aerospace Museum.”

“I honestly think that’s where she got the idea to send us here,” Ted turned to him slightly
accusingly.

“Well, if you had just slept with her when she made her move--!” He told him.

“I didn’t know that’s what she wanted,” the other man returned. “I just figured she was just staring at
my crotch because I spilled something.”

“She was staring at your crotch because you ‘spilled’ something?” The lighter haired man snorted
derisively.

“I was eating a jelly doughnut and it sort of squirted all over my khakis.”

“Unbelievable,” Booster grumbled.

Laurel and Felicity exchanged looks and she sighed, “Look, find me tomorrow night and we’ll talk,
okay? Until then, you should know that the rooftop sentries left and we have two operatives that are
going to remain inside the building for now. Can you guys call a few extra people in?”

“Yeah, we figured something was up when they loaded up and took off like that.”

“Kind of hard not to notice them,” Ted said. “They were *hot*.” He paused and cringed slightly at
Felicity’s raised eyebrow. “I mean, not ‘hot’ but highly attractive in a totally non-objectifying kind of
way, ma’am.”

“So can you call in extra security or what?” Felicity asked slightly impatiently again.

“Yes ma’am,” Booster said quickly. “We’ll place a call to Stellmoor now and have them send some
more guys. Oh, here’s your key fob!”

“Thank you,” she said as she accepted the fob and slipped into the driver’s seat while Laurel got into
the passenger side.

“Are you gonna be okay drivin’, honey?” Wildcat asked as he bent down beside her open window.

“I got it,” Felicity said wearily. “If there’s one thing I know how to do, it’s function on little to no
sleep.”

“I can drive,” Laurel offered.

“No,” Felicity told her. “If we get pulled over for some reason and you’re caught driving with a
suspended license—it’s not worth it,” she grimaced. “I’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” Wildcat said, patting the rooftop of the car. “I’ll see you gals tomorrow then.”

“Night Wildcat!” Laurel called out and Felicity waved at him before rolling up the window.
“Goodnight Director Starling!” Booster said happily as she put the car in gear.

“That’s not—never mind,” Felicity grumbled as she pulled away and headed through the gates toward Midtown. “What hotel are you staying at?”


“Yeah, I know it,” she told her. “On 47th street near the R.H. Kane Building. Makes sense that Stellmoor would keep their corporate apartments within walking distance of their offices.” She yawned, “Okay, we’ll get your stuff then stop by a grocery store on the way back,” she said, turning up the music to keep her awake. “I have a feeling we’re going to need to pick up coffee.”

*I’ve got movement again,* Dick said. *There’s two armored vans pulling away from the loading dock and heading to the gate.*

Oliver looked through the night vision binoculars and tightened in on one of the large black vans that emerged from the back of the building followed by a second identical vehicle, “I haven’t seen any more sentries come back up, have you?”

*No,* he told him. *I’m also starting to get nervous about the fact that Baby still hasn’t left the building yet. You thinking what I’m thinking?*

“That she might be in one of the vans? Yeah,” he said in a near growl. It wouldn’t be the first time Felicity had gotten herself in that type of situation. “Can you keep watch here while I follow them?”

*On it.*

Oliver tucked the light night vision goggles into his jacket and ran across the rooftops, firing a grappling line from his bow whenever the gap was too much for him to cross. He’d suited up before coming out, a fact for which he was now grateful. Another thing he was grateful for was, unlike Starling, the buildings in Gotham were built far closer together allowing him to keep sight of the van without having to stop or go to ground.

He easily hopped from rooftop to rooftop, keeping to the shadows as best he could, without ever taking his eyes off the prize. The miles disappeared under his feet as the adrenaline pushed aside his exhaustion. All he cared about was his target at that point. “I think they’re headed for a helipad on top of one of the skyscrapers,” Oliver said.

*Which one?* Dick asked.

“I don’t know; looks like…downtown, past Kane Square on 47th.” He pulled out the binoculars again. “The R.H. Kane Building.”

*Doesn’t Stellmoor have offices there?*

“Yeah,” he said as he watched the rooftop carefully. “They drove into an underground parking structure but there’s a couple of choppers on the roof ready to go. I’m going to get closer.”

*Hey, Felicity just came out of the building with another woman and Wildcat,* he told him.

Oliver hesitated. On one hand he wanted to find out what was going on here but he also needed to stick close to Felicity. He opened his mouth to tell Dick he was heading back when another voice came over the coms.
“Who?” Oliver asked.

//Question. I’m patching her into coms now.//

//Hi boys, I hear you might need a hand?// Said the slightly husky feminine voice Oliver assumed was this ‘Question’ person.

//Always,// Dick said with a hint of amusement.

*\?/*\?/*\?/*

Felicity dropped the seat back and closed her eyes while Laurel ran inside to get her stuff. She had dimmed the interior lights and parked under a broken security pole in hopes of catching a catnap while the other woman got her stuff together and checked out. She was almost asleep when she heard a tapping at her window,

She opened one eye to see a kid in a thick hooded jacket staring at her, “Hey lady, my car won’t start; you got any jumper cables? I left my lights on by accident.”

“Nope, sorry,” she told him without rolling down her window.

What was she; new? Please.

Another harder rap came from the other side and Felicity almost rolled her eyes at the sight of a second man, tire iron in hand, eyeing her through the window.

A third man came out of the shadows with a gun stuck down the front of his jeans, his hand already on the trigger, as he approached and practically stood against her front bumper.

Why? She thought. Why do street thugs think it looks bad ass to walk around like they’re holding their own dicks hostage? What if the gun went off; how bad ass is it to shoot off your own dick?

Same thing with wearing their pants down around their thighs; if you’re going to be a criminal you shouldn’t wear something that can fall off your ass and trip you up.

Simple logic.

The man who originally tapped at her window grinned toothily at her and flicked a switchblade at eye level, making sure to show her the blade, “Get out of the car, bitch!”

She was getting real goddamn tired of being called a bitch.

Felicity put the seat back upright and sighed, “Okay.”

She threw the car in gear and hit the gas—hard.

The guy with the switchblade jumped back in surprise as the guy holding his dick at gunpoint yelped before he went under the car with a loud thump...

…although why he was surprised was beyond her. If you threaten a person with a gun and they’re in a running vehicle, then chances are they’re going to run you over; again, simple logic, right?

The thug on the passenger side reared back and slammed the tire iron into the side glass causing the
window to explode inward. Felicity reached into her clutch, pulled out Isabel’s gun, and fired. Two bullets hit him in the shoulder causing him to cry out in pain and fall back. The man with the blade ran up to his partner who had fallen under her car, grabbed his gun, and began shooting at her back glass. Felicity slammed on the brakes, threw it into reverse, and gassed it. She heard a thud as she backed over the first guy again and slammed hard into Switchblade causing him to go flying over her trunk, roll over her hood, then fall to the ground in a heap.

She put it into park, grabbed her cellphone, and dialed 911. She glanced at her bleeding and broken would-be attackers, the shattered glass, and the damaged front and back end of the very expensive car, and sighed, “I sure hope Isabel has insurance.”

*\%/\%/\%/\%/\%
Question rode up to the Burnley just as the three men surrounded the expensive silver sedan, “Shit,” she muttered, about to gun it when whoever was driving decided to lay some rubber.

//What’s going on?// She heard the Arrow say in alarm.

“Um…” She watched in disbelief as the first man went under the car, his leg catching the tires, followed by the flash of the gunshots as the second gang member took two in the shoulder and fell back.

“Crap,” she said as she drove her bike down the alley, “Got a situation here!”

The third man began to fire at the back glass only to wind up flying over the hood of the car as the person in the driver’s seat put the car in reverse and turned him into a hood ornament but not before running over the first guy again, this time running over the other leg.

“Holy shit!”

//Was that gunfire?// Nightwing asked in alarm.

//I’m coming over there!// Arrow said roughly.

//I’m almost there myself,// Dick said, his breath coming in harsh pants as he ran along the rooftops.

“Actually guys, I think it’s under control,” she said in disbelief.

She skidded to a halt, her gun already in hand, as the pretty little blonde she’d tried to pick up earlier got out of the car. She was holding her phone to one ear, the other holding a small handgun, as she walked around to the front of the vehicle and looked at all three men who were groaning in pain and clutching at their injuries.

“Is anybody dead?” Felicity asked blithely before she shrugged and spoke into the receiver, “Nope, they’re still alive but you might want to send an ambulance.”


“She’s fine from what I can see,” Question told them, “The carjackers though; not so much.”

//Carjackers?// Arrow demanded, //Felicity was carjacked?//

“No, she was almost carjacked,” she told him, “And then she almost committed vehicular manslaughter and shot up the joint.” She shook her head, “I think I just fell in love.”

//We’re on our way,// Nightwing told her. //Get Felicity out of there before the cops come.//
“Good idea,” she threw down the kick stand and got off her bike. She started toward her, mouth already forming her greeting, when she heard a click.

“Drop it,” said the voice behind her.

She turned her head slightly, spotting the brunette in the red leather jacket who was training a **Sig Sauer P220** at her head. Without even having to think, she dropped and spun, sweeping her legs out from under her. The brunette dropped her gun with a clatter but sprang back up and threw a solid left, catching her hard in the jaw.

Question threw up a block and began to swing, the brunette giving as good as she got. Shamed to say, they appeared pretty evenly matched. Even though the pretty brunette hadn’t landed anymore punches, neither had she.

“Laurel, stop! I know her!”

The brunette stopped punching but leapt back in a fighting stance just as Felicity came jogging up to them. “You know her?” She asked breathlessly.

“Yeah, this is Renee,” Felicity said, looking at her curiously. “What are you doing out here?”

Question looked at her in disbelief, “What?”

The howl of sirens could be heard in the distance and Felicity turned to the brunette, “Look, I don’t feel like having to sit in a police station all night so grab your bags and gun! Renee,” she turned toward her, “do you want to ride with us or just follow us on your bike?”

“Um…what?” She said again.

“Just follow us on your bike then,” she said, helping Laurel with her other bag and half running half jogging to the car. They tossed the bags in the back seat and hopped in. Felicity tore out of the parking lot but not before running over hood ornament number two for a second time.

Renee blinked as she watched the would-be thug scream and clutch at his now very broken femur, “What. The. Fuck?” She said again to herself before hopping on her bike and riding in the direction the two women had gone just before the cops pulled into the parking lot.

/What’s happening!/ Arrow demanded.

Question glanced behind her as the EMT’s pulled into the parking lot behind the squad cars, “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Who the hell was that? You knew her?” Laurel asked her incredulously as Felicity drove toward the Wayne Foundation.

“Oh, yeah, that was a woman I met at the girl bar Isabel took us to,” she said shivering. Goddamn assholes, she thought bitterly. They just had to try to carjack her during a freaking snowstorm.

Shithheads.

The good news was that traffic was light due to the now heavy snowfall and, other than some dings and shattered windows, it wasn’t overly obvious that they’d been in a fire fight. Hopefully no one would look too closely. The one good thing about driving a silver car is that it blended well with the
“You met a mask at a lesbian bar?” She asked in disbelief.

“Well, I met Renee at a lesbian bar, I don’t know for sure that she was a mask though,” she said, catching the yellow before it turned red and steadily making her way toward the Wayne Foundation Building. Luckily the Burnley was just on the edge of Midtown in the Financial district so they’d be home soon.

Screw grocery shopping, she was taking a bath and then going straight to bed. 
Right after she scrubbed all the traffic cam and security footage around the hotel.

She just couldn’t catch a break to save her life. 

“She was definitely a mask,” Laurel said flatly.

“It’s possible,” Felicity said, pulling her scarf tighter before jacking the heat full blast. “It’s Gotham; you can’t throw a dead cat without either hitting a mask or a theme villain.”

“Theme villain?” She repeated slowly.

“Joker, Riddler, the Calculator…”

“Calculator?” She repeated, “They have a bad guy called ‘The Calculator’ here?”

She wrinkled her nose in sympathy, “Yeah, he was kind of lame actually. He wore a big calculator on his chest for a while during the 80’s then gave it up in order to become a kind of ‘mastermind for hire’. He’s still pretty lame but at least he doesn’t walk around with gear made by Texas Instruments anymore.”

“How many creeps does this city have anyway?”

“A bunch,” she admitted.

“Yeah, but, compared to Starling their bad guys are…bad; like tough, right?” Laurel asked as she shivered in her leather jacket.

“We have a lot of really tough bad guys,” she said slightly defensively. “Slade for one.”

“Yeah but, he was like the worst one,” Laurel said, teeth chattering. “Gotham had the Joker, Bane, the bird guy—”

“Penguin,” she offered, feeling like she was in the arctic circle herself at that point. “But we did have some tough baddies, too, you know. It’s not like we were complete amateurs fighting against the ‘B’ squad. Like the Count, for one…of course, he’s dead now,” she frowned. “Deadshot—no, he’s sort of a good guy now. Bronze Tiger? Nope, another kind of sort of good guy. Huntress,” she offered then grimaced. “Okay, so maybe we do have the D-Listers of Evil on the West Coast. What is it with all of our bad guys turning into good guys? Is it just me or have you noticed that, too?”

“I’m not so sure Helena counts as a good guy yet. Are we almost there by the way?” Laurel said in a near whine.

“Almost,” Felicity shivered as another gust of wind blew some snowflakes into the interior of the car. “Fuck it’s cold! Why did they have to shoot out the windows?”
Laurel glanced behind them, “Your friend without the face is still following us on her bike... although how she can be on a motorcycle in this weather...?”

“My what?” She frowned.

“Renee?” Laurel offered. “The woman I was fighting back at the hotel.”

“Yeah, I got that, I just didn’t know why you said she didn’t have a face.”

“Because she doesn’t have a face,” Laurel told her.

“She has a face!” She said just as they pulled into the underground parking structure of the Wayne Foundation. “Thank God, at least we’re out of the wind and snow.”

“She didn’t have a face,” Laurel told her as they drove down to the bottom level.

“She has a face,” Felicity told her again as she parked in the space closest to the private elevator that was somewhat shadowy. “I think I saw a car cover in the trunk when I tossed my garment bag in there earlier,” she said, popping the boot.

The women got out of the car and Laurel took her bags out of the back seat and put them aside while Felicity opened up the folded cover and slammed the trunk shut. “We’ll figure out what to do with the car tomorrow,” she told her. “Tonight I could give a shit.”

“All I’m asking is how do you know it’s the same woman you met at the bar?” Laurel asked doggedly.

“Because I saw her,” she said, struggling to get the cover on right as Laurel helped from the other side.

“When?” She said, tucking it around the front end.

“At the bar,” she told her irritably. “We talked, I danced with her…”

“No, I mean when did you see her face at the hotel?”

She furrowed her brow, “Huh?”

“She was wearing a mask so how did you know it was her?”

“What are you talking about?” She frowned just as Renee pulled up.

“The Wayne Foundation Building,” Renee muttered as she shut off her engine and got off her bike. “Should’ve known when Nightwing called you’d be one of his.”

“You really are a mask?” Felicity said in surprise. “Damn, well that explains the whole charity discussion.”

“Uh yeah,” Renee said as she approached them warily, “Speaking of which, how exactly did you know it was me back there?”

“What do you mean?” She asked her.

“You couldn’t see my face; how did you know it was me?”

“Told you so,” Laurel said, hitching one bag up on her shoulder and carrying the other.
“What are you--?” She turned to look at Renee head on and screamed, jumping nearly a foot in the air. “What happened to your face?”

Both women jumped with her and Renee reached for her belt buckle causing the illusion to dissipate and her features to become clear once more.

“Holy shit,” Felicity said, clutching at her chest, “You scared the crap out of me.”

Renee hurried toward her with a chagrined look, “Are you okay?”

“No!” She said, slapping her arm angrily and causing the other woman to pull back. “What the hell was that?”

The other woman held up her hands in a sign of capitulation, “It’s my version of a mask. It’s called ‘pseudo-derm’ and it’s a fake skin that covers my face when I apply a binary gas.”

“Well why would you wait until now to put it on?” She asked her. “Why not use it back at the hotel?”

“I was wearing it back at the hotel,” she said slowly. “That’s the reason I was asking you how you knew it was me in the first place.”

“Told you so!” Laurel said triumphantly.

She looked from one woman to the other, “Really?”

“Yeah,” Renee nodded.

Felicity shut her eyes for a moment and rolled her neck wearily, “Okay, fine, whatever; I’ll figure it out later but, for now, let’s just go upstairs.” She walked over to the private elevator and entered the code. “Are you coming up?” She asked Renee as Laurel got in beside her.

“Might as well,” she shrugged following them in.

“Are you hungry?” She asked as the doors closed.

“Starving,” Laurel said.

“I could eat,” Renee said off-handedly.

“Me too,” Felicity said with a yawn, “Apparently raw steak and fish eggs aren’t all that filling.”

“Or appetizing,” Renee muttered.

“I thought you said we needed to go grocery shopping,” Laurel pointed out.

“Oh yeah. What time is it?” She asked and Renee held up her watch for her inspection. “Okay, so who’s up for pizza?”

“I’ll order,” Laurel said happily. “Gluten, meat, dairy; swear to God I’m eating anything and everything they have on the menu as long as it has carbs or a face.”

“Wow,” Renee said, looking from one woman to the other. She shook her head and grinned, “This night just keeps getting better and better.”

Felicity leaned wearily on the side of the elevator and waited for the doors to slide open, “Glad
someone’s having a good day.”
Chapter Fifty

Chapter Notes

I decided to change my vote for Renee's actress. It was Victoria Cartagena but now I'm going with Michelle Rodriguez. She seems to fit better somehow. :p

Enjoy!
Chapter Fifty

When the women arrived at the penthouse, the first place they went was into the kitchen where Felicity stood and stared at the brand new large Tuscan style butcher block table that Tam had apparently brought in earlier. Even half-dead, she felt her heart skip for joy when she looked at it for the first time. It was everything she’d ever imagined and more even if, at the moment, she didn’t have enough energy to so much as crack a smile.

Weird as it may sound, her best memories of home always happened around the kitchen table at her father’s house so this, more than anything else, cemented the idea of this apartment being her home. It was big, at least as big as the one at her dad’s place if not bigger and could easily seat fourteen people with plenty of elbow room. The legs were thick, ornately carved, and white-washed giving it the look of an antique. The top of the table was made up of a thick block of wood that was aged and treated with tung oil and beeswax so that it had that rich sense of history to it. To add warmth to the space, Tam had purchased several thickly padded chairs upholstered in a blue willow inspired print to go around it along with several high backed bar stools in the same shade of blue to sit at the counter to offer balance without being overly matchy.

This was so Tam, she thought when she first saw the room. In just a day she had taken every dream she’d ever had and brought it to life in her own unique way. The same woman who could go from ultra-modern chic to Turkish spice bazaar inspired décor could also, in a matter of hours, throw just a few items in a formally minimalist kitchen space and turn it into a country farmhouse. The copper vent hood, brushed aluminum appliances, and richly stained wooden floors warmed with just the additions of a table, some chairs, a sideboard and oversized china cabinet, and a new set of curtains.

The curtains were the other big surprise. Even though she and Zander swore up and down that it was impossible to get curtains made that fast, she suspected they just said ‘to hell with it’ and bought a few bolts of material from the fabric store and did it themselves. The crisp blue and white gingham curtains reached from the top of the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the rooftop garden to fall in folds against the highly polished floors. It didn’t even matter that the curtains weren’t finished or hemmed; they were perfect. Everything was perfect.

It wasn’t what she asked for, it wasn’t what she expected, but it was perfect right down to the blue willow dishes on display in the china cabinet and the rich blue table runner and pitcher filled with sunflowers in the center of the table. She took one look at it and felt like crying, it was just that damn gorgeous.
Had she time to appreciate it, she would have sat at that table for hours just daydreaming of the warmth of friends and family as they cooked and ate together. She wanted a life where the formal dining room was never used, where children stole cookies off of cooling racks while doing their homework, and where meals were planned and executed without relying on crockpots or take out menus. She saw that kitchen and wished she had the time and energy to dream of future days where she finally learned to bake bread without a machine and Wednesday meant meatloaf with mashed potatoes for dinner but today, unfortunately, wasn’t that day.

Instead, she left Laurel and Renee to enjoy her dream kitchen without her. She went straight into the bedroom for her tablet, taking only enough time to strip off her clothes to throw on a pair of soft cashmere leggings and one of Bruce’s sweaters that nearly brushed her knees, stole yet another pair of his wool socks (he was really beginning to run low on those), then padded back into the kitchen to cover up the evidence of her crimes. In the time it took her to walk from the bedroom to the kitchen, she had already managed to hack the hotel server and corrupt the security feeds and was already working on the traffic cam footage.

Normally, she’d be a bit more elegant in her hack; she’d loop feeds or transpose earlier footage so that nothing was obvious, but she was too tired for fancy and time was of the essence. Even in Gotham, it wouldn’t take the cops long to request that CCTV footage, so fast and dirty was all she had time for.

She walked into the kitchen to see Laurel already standing at the counter making a pot of coffee (naturally), while she and Renee were having an animated discussion about who had the best late-night pizza delivery in this part of town.

“Aparo’s,” Renee told her.

“But Yelp says that—”

“I’m telling you, sweetheart, it’s Aparo’s,” Renee said firmly. “Best pies in the city.”

“Okay, if you say so,” she pulled up their menu on the tablet that was sitting in the docking station in the kitchen an brought up their website. “Oooh!” She said with a grin.

“Told ya,” Renee said as she leaned forward against the bar. She’d removed her leather jacket and fedora, her black hair windblown and tumbling down her back. Even with no make-up and rumpled from fighting with Laurel, she was still an incredibly handsome woman. Meanwhile, Felicity knew she looked like something the dog puked up then ate off the carpet.

If she didn’t, then it was a certifiable miracle because that’s definitely what she felt like. She eyed the Ziploc of herbs on the counter and debated before dismissing it. There was no getting used to that taste and she certainly wasn’t going to take them just because she was feeling sore and rundown. The only thing that would fix that was sleep. She yawned and refocused her eyes as she finished hacking into the footage and began deleting everything.

“What’s doin’, sunshine?” Renee asked her.

“Scrubbing the traffic cam footage,” she said distractedly. “After that I need to hack into GCPD and make sure they didn’t already download anything and then I can eat, shower, and go to bed.”

The other woman gave her an odd look, “Wait, you can do that from a tablet? All I can do with mine is read trashy novels and play games.”

“She does it all the time,” Laurel said as she poured three cups of coffee and placed them in front of
her companions as she scrolled through the menu.

“From an iPad?” She repeated.

“Yeah, well, this is an Android but I can pretty much do it from anything,” Felicity told her. Luckily, from what she could see, they were still processing the scene and going under the assumption that it was a gang thing since the carjackers weren’t talking. Because the first responders were turning it over to the gang unit, no one had requested the feeds yet. She double-checked her hack, made sure it looked like a bug in the system, and closed it up. “And done,” she said, putting down her tablet and reaching for the coffee Laurel handed her. She looked at it, debated for a second, then said ‘fuck it’. “Oh, this is so good!” She hummed as she absorbed the heat from the cup.

“You’re done?” She asked in disbelief. “You hacked all that in a matter of seconds.”

“You think that’s impressive, you should see what she can do with her phone,” Laurel told her. “Hello, Aparo’s? Are you guys still delivering? Great! Hang on,” she put her hand over the receiver, “Is there anything you guys don’t want? Otherwise I’m ordering the whole menu.”

“Seriously?” Renee asked her and at her nod she cleared her throat, “Ah, no anchovies.”

“No nuts,” Felicity told her as she sank into one of the new chairs for the first time. It was cozy, comfortable, and all she could think of was the many nights they’d spent playing board games around the table at her dad’s place and her vow to buy chairs soft enough to not let your butt go numb.

She really loved her sister for remembering that.

“Okay, here’s my order; we’ll have the garlic bread with cheese, make that a double order with double cheese. The tomato and mozzarella app, three cheddar and apple salads—no nuts, with the vinaigrette. Add chicken to that, double chicken, and no nuts. I know I said that already but we have someone with a food allergy here so if I find a nut I won’t be happy. Great. Okay, ooooh, give me a three of those Mediterranean salads and three Tre Colori, a double order of the Garlic Shrimp Linguine, the Linguine and Mushrooms in Truffle Sauce, some of the Pappardelle al Fugi with Chicken in Carbonara Sauce, the raviolli—you know what, forget everything I said and just give me two of everything on the pasta menu along with everything else I’ve already ordered. Yes, I’m serious; why wouldn’t I be serious about something like that?”

Renee shot Felicity a look but she just shrugged and continued to sip her coffee.

“Nope, not done yet; hang on,” she put her hand over the receiver again, “How do you guys feel about pineapple?”

“That it doesn’t belong on a pizza,” Renee told her.

Laurel pulled a face, “Fine, I’ll eat that one.”

Felicity got up and grabbed her clutch from the living room before wandering back into the kitchen where Laurel was still ordering.

“…but I want the Big Pineapple to be a personal size, everything else is large. Is there anything bigger than a large? Okay, fine, anyway, I want a Classica with double meat, the El Greco but add some meat to it. I don’t care what kind as long as it’s not anchovy. Yeah, grilled chicken is fine. The Formaggio Bianco, put meat on that, too. In fact, I want meat on everything. Just tons and tons of meat, okay? Double it. Oooh, the Meat Lover’s, yes! Can you do double meat on that? Yeah, I don’t care what it costs. The Meatball Classic double it plus pepperoni, and the Parma. Hey, do you guys
do that thing where you put a pizza on top of a pizza? You know where it’s like a double crust thing? I want tons of bread. No, hell no! I want the kind with the gluten! Put extra gluten in it! Well, fine, the regular amount of gluten then. No, no wheat crust or thin crust, I want crust, just unhealthy regular crust—in fact, if you can double the cheese, the meat, the crust, plus stuff it—Yeah, all of them. No, not done yet; I’ll tell you when I’m done okay?”

Felicity reached into the clutch and set Isabel’s gun aside on the counter before pulling out her wallet and tossing Bruce’s card in front of Laurel. The other woman looked up questioningly and she gave her a nod.

“Oh, and sandwiches!”

“Hang on,” Renee turned to her with a bewildered expression on her face, “Is she just ordering for the three of us or…?”

“She just got out of a ninety day treatment program where all they fed her was grass juice.”

“Fuck,” Renee said in horror.

“Why the hell is everybody putting chipotle on everything? You’re an Italian place; if I wanted to order Mexican food I would have. Leave that crap off. Anyway, give me a Chicken Parm on a Hero—oh, how big are they? Like big-big or…? No, big is good. Can you double the meat on those, too? Yeah, I know you said they were big, I still want the meat. Okay, I also want the Grilled Chicken Caesar on Pita, and the Meatball Hero, double up on those, too. Oh, and dessert—what? No, we don’t need the catering menu; it’s just for three people. No THREE.”

Renee burst out in laughter, “A big what?”

“Sandwich,” Felicity offered as she continued to go through her emails on her phone to see if Bruce had left her any messages.

“No, we don’t have the munchies and I don’t know where you can score some weed; Jesus! Do I need to get the manager on the phone? Well, it wasn’t funny, now where was I? Oh, three bread puddings, three cheese cakes—hey, are there nuts in the cookies or in the brownies? Damn, oh well. Hey, can you get me the whole tiramisu? Like the whole thing? Again, don’t care, just give me my cake. Oh, and three diet cokes. Why are you laughing? You know, this is very unprofessional—no this isn’t a crank call! Just tell me how much I owe you? Damn; six hundred what? Is that with the tip? Okay,” she picked up the card and looked at the name then looked at Felicity who nodded again, “Okay if I use AmEx? Good, here’s my number, it’s…”

“She’s not actually going to eat all of that, is she?” Renee asked dubiously.

“Maybe not the salads,” she said, pulling out her phone to dial Bruce. “I think those were for us and the rest is for her.”

“No way,” the other woman snorted.

She looked at her, “Ask her about rehab and you’ll see what I mean. I wouldn’t recommend it however.”

“I went to rehab,” Renee told her. “It wasn’t that bad…other than having to clean toilets and saying the friggin’ Serenity Prayer every five minutes.”

“She went to vegan rehab with hot yoga and they wouldn’t let her have caffeine, sugar, salt, meat, or gluten and, apparently, the only way she could have coffee is if they shoved it up her ass.”
The other woman looked at Laurel with a mixture of horror and respect, “God. *Damn*.”

“Exactly,” she waited for the phone to ring a few times before she hung up. She didn’t even bother leaving a message since she knew Bruce well enough to know that if he wasn’t picking up then there was a good reason for it.

Laurel hung up the phone then turned to Felicity, “Why do you have Bruce Wayne’s AmEx Black?”

“That’s the question you ask?” Renee shot back, “Not why she’s living in his apartment, just why she has his card? Speaking of which…?” She turned to Felicity.

“That’s a long story but the card I lifted from his wallet because he deserved it, but it’s okay because he trashed my house and was being a dick,” she told them. “Afterwards he let me have it anyway so it’s not even a crime or anything.”

“You stole Bruce Wayne’s wallet?” Renee asked her.

Laurel snorted, “She stole like eighty-six thousand dollars from my ex’s personal account when he pissed her off the last time and I’ve seen her drain a bad guy’s bank account of millions in less than a couple of minutes.”

Renee looked from one woman to the other, “What are you guys; like a couple of high-end thieves? You’re the computer expert and she’s the muscle?”

“Not exactly,” Felicity said distractedly as she turned to Laurel, “You knew about that?”

“How about you paid everybody’s bills, my dad’s mortgage, and bought all of that stuff for the guys out of the ‘team fund’? Yeah,” she said with a sad smile. “Ollie was looking through it on his tablet and when I asked him what was up he told me you were probably just taking care of some stuff. I actually got a little pissed off about it because he told me he wasn’t even going to ask you about it; he was just planning on letting it go.”

She flushed, “Actually, the whole point of me taking the money out of his personal account was so that he would say something.”

“It wasn’t his fault, you know,” Laurel told her, her face darkening slightly. She swallowed, “I’m the one who blocked your calls and erased all your voicemails from his phone.”

“Crap,” Renee hissed, “Talk about awkward; should I stop this?”

”No, We’re good,” Felicity told her. She turned back to Laurel, “As for the voicemail thing, I already knew you erased them.”

Laurel looked at her in confusion, “Really? You never said anything to Ollie, though.”

“Look, what you did wasn’t right but I can kind of understand why you did it,” she told her. “That doesn’t mean it wasn’t shitty and childish, just that I get it. Oliver, however, should have known something was up. He went weeks without even speaking to me even though he should have because we were supposed to be partners. Even if we weren’t really friends, even if I was just another tool in his arsenal, he should have made the effort. He didn’t even try to reach out and that’s not on you, that’s on him.”

“Burn,” Renee muttered. “Do you guys want me to go?”

“Stay,” Laurel told her with a slight smile. “Unless, of course, you’re uncomfortable, because we can
“No,” she said in a tight voice, “I’ll just—sit here and let you guys talk it out.” She bit her lip and looked from one woman to the other but neither of them were really paying any attention to her at that point.

“Thanks,” she said to the other woman before offering her a slightly guilty look, “He was your friend, Felicity,” Laurel said quietly, her brow furrowed in regret. “In fact, you guys were more than friends and that’s what killed me. I couldn’t compete with what you two had together; I didn’t even know how.”

“You didn’t have to,” she told her. “Nothing ever happened between us while you guys were together.”

“Maybe not physically, but he was in love with you and it was obvious you had a thing for him back. The worst part was that everybody knew it, including you guys, but you never did anything about it so it was this *thing* hanging over our heads all the time,” she grimaced, “I used to almost wish you guys would hook up because as long as you were this untouchable paragon of all things pure and wonderful, I would always come up short.” She took a deep breath and threw her an apologetic look, “Sorry, I know that sounds kind of bitter, but I--”

“Like I said, I get it,” she said, offering her a tired smile.

“It just—I don’t know,” the other woman said, smoothing her hands over her face then over her hair and scrubbing them over her scalp as if to relieve herself of the memory, “I guess that is pretty crazy, huh? Oliver had a way of making me nuts.”

“If it’s of any comfort, he made everyone feel nuts sometimes, and when he wasn’t driving us crazy, he was pissing us off,” she snorted.

“I noticed that you said you guys didn’t hook up when we were together; how about after?” Laurel asked warily.

Felicity took a centering breath, “We had one night together right before I came to Gotham,” she admitted. “Literally, the night before I left.”

“I don’t get it; you guys were like some kind of larger-than-life romance in the making so what happened?” She asked in confusion. “Not that I’m criticizing you for leaving or anything. I mean, I’m not judging you or telling you that I think you were wrong in any way…”

“No, look, I get it,” she assured her. “I hear what you’re saying now and I also heard what you said earlier, but you’re wrong; we weren’t a love story and I’m not the hero you think I am.” She bit her lip, “I didn’t leave Oliver, he threw me out. We had one night and I thought he might love me; I was…God, I was in love with him, but he didn’t want me, so I left.” She paused, “No, ‘left’ isn’t right; I was exiled. He told me I was no longer welcome in Starling, that if I even tried to come back I would be walled out, and that he could not and would not allow himself to have a relationship with me. I even tried calling him a few times to see if he’d change his mind, at least let me back on the team, but he didn’t; he wouldn’t. The truth is that if Oliver had told me he wanted me back, if he had said ‘stay’, I would have stayed. Even if it meant going back to being invisible, I probably would have been happy just existing in the shadows.” She took a centering breath, “You might have enabled him but you weren’t alone in that. I spent years letting him make me feel like I was important when he needed me and invisible when he didn’t. He loved you, Laurel, not me; it was never going to be me, I was just the designated bait.” She offered her a sad half-smile, “You keep telling yourself that I beat you somehow, like this was a competition between us, but it wasn’t. There was never a
you against me here; I’m not the competition and I’m no hero. Tell you the truth, when you think about it you and I are more alike than you think; you just happened to get there first and I just happened to get out a little sooner. That doesn’t mean either of us won, it just means that now we can compare scars.”

Laurel looked at her for a moment before moving closer and pulling her into a warm embrace. Felicity melted into her arms, so like Sara’s, and breathed in the other woman’s perfume. Narciso Rodriguez, she thought as she identified the floral scent that enveloped her. It was strong, stronger than the scents she, herself, wore, but not overpowering. It was very Laurel in that it made a statement while remaining utterly feminine and beautiful.

It was amazing how much perfume said about the wearer. Laurel was bold jasmine and musky amber; she captured your attention just by walking into the room. Tam was J’adore, sparkling, effervescent, and clean. Thea was Le Parfum de Therese; peachy clean and floral joy but with a maturity that belied her obvious youth. Sara was plain soap and water; she was just herself with no need for adornment or attention. Such incredible, amazing women; and she was truly blessed to be able to call them her friends.

Even Laurel. She breathed in her scent deep and tightened her arms around her. Maybe even especially Laurel. They shared scars that only the other person could appreciate. Oliver had left his mark on both of them, albeit more deeply on Laurel. Meanwhile, Bruce, at one point, had been Felicity’s deepest heartache; deep enough to make her run 3000 miles away from Gotham and tank her career. Just because she and Bruce were together it didn’t change the past. Laurel might have clung to Oliver but she ran from both of them.

Really, who’s to say which was worse? Certainly not her; she was done judging the other woman for her mistakes and trespasses. That was done and, at that moment, with Laurel’s arms squeezing her tight, she simply was. It had been a hard road, a long day, but as she leaned against the flawed, strong woman holding her, she knew this, at least, was done.

The slate was clean.

Renee touched her left ear and frowned, “Um, not to interrupt this epic sisterhood bonding thing you guys are doing because, hey, lovin’ the vibe, but who’s Oliver?”

Felicity flushed; she’d almost forgotten about Renee being in the room, “Sorry,” she apologized quickly.

“Me, too; sorry about that but to answer your question, apparently he’s our mutual ex-boyfriend,” Laurel said, sniffing as she pulled back with a chuckle. She wiped at her eyes and groaned as she reached for a napkin. “Why I still try to wear mascara these days is beyond me.”

“No, I mean, he wouldn’t happen to be a mask, would he?” She asked hesitantly. “Um, say, the Arrow?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact…” Laurel snorted in surprise. “How’d you guess?”

“Um yeah,” Renee winced and pulled out her earbud, shutting it off quickly, “Just, you know, a shot in the dark…” she cleared her throat. “And your brother is Batwing, right?”

“What’s a Batwing?” Laurel asked in confusion.

“Yeah; wait, was that a com link?” Felicity asked as the other woman stuck the earbud in her pocket. “Yep. So…” she said with an overly bright grin, “how long do you think it’ll be until the food gets
here? I don’t know about you, but I’m freaking starving!” She paused, “Oh, and by the way, there’s a small chance that we might be getting some company for dinner.”

Oliver and Nightwing looked down on the scene below with matching expressions of irritation.

“What the hell happened down there?” Oliver demanded as he watched the EMTs stabilized the gunshot victim while the two EMTs in the second ambulance, carefully put the other two gangbangers in cervical cuffs and back boards.

“All I can tell you is that Blondie is a freaking bad ass and the brunette in red leather ain’t all that shabby herself,” Question said over the coms. “I am seriously crushing big time.”

“Felicity did that?” Nightwing asked incredulously. “Since when does she carry a gun?”

“I don’t know, but she managed to put two in one guy’s shoulder while in a moving vehicle so she’s either a good shot or he’s one lucky son of a bitch. She’s kind of a shitty driver though—or not. She ran over the other two twice. And not at the same time either; she ran over one, backed over him to hit the other, then ran the last guy over again as she escaped and still managed to not kill anybody. She also immediately called 911 so they’ll probably be okay even though they won’t be running marathons or jacking cars for a while. If you ask me, that either shows real talent or someone needs to take that little firecracker’s driving privileges away.”

“Baby ran them over *four* times?” Dick said in utter disbelief then turned an accusatory eye toward Oliver as though it was all his fault.

“Yeah,” Oliver said stiffly, his cheeks flushing slightly. “It’s not the first time she’s turned a vehicle into a makeshift weapon.” At the other man’s expression he grimaced, “During the Blood Army’s attack in Starling, she used the tactical van to ram some of the super soldiers in order to protect a member of the team. She didn’t back over them a second time though. She offered but…” he didn’t bother finishing the sentence.

“Wait, you’re telling me that the petite blonde chick was at the center of that thing in Starling City a while back?” There was a pause, “Okay, damn, she’s mine; I officially call dibs.”

“What does she mean, she calls dibs?” Oliver scowled.

“Sorry Question, she’s already taken,” Dick told her, shaking his head. “Very, very taken.”

“Yeah? Since when do you go for blondes? I thought you had that fetish for tall redheads? I heard it was kind of your thing.”

“I don’t have a ‘thing’ for redheads,” Dick scoffed.

“Name one person you’ve dated that wasn’t a tall ginger, Batboy.”

He opened his mouth to speak then faltered.

“She’s got you there,” Luke snorted on his end.

“Trust me; you’re barking up the wrong tree,” Oliver said in grim amusement. “You’re not her type.” “Think so, huh?” Question shot back.
“I know so,” he told her.

//So I guess that she wasn’t the girl I danced with at Siren’s earlier and she didn’t give me her digits after I totally picked her up at the bar.//

“Felicity went to a lesbian bar?” Dick blinked.

//Eh, that’s not really news.// Luke drawled. //Tam and Baby used to hang at girl bars all the time.//

“Say what now?” Oliver asked with a frown.

//Looks like the future Mrs. Question and our mutual playmate, the hot brunette, just turned into the underground parking structure at the Wayne Foundation Building. I’m going radio silent for a while. Here’s hoping I get lucky.//

Oliver made an irritated noise deep in his throat.

“Keep the channel open just in case,” Dick told her.

//Kinky.//

“Funny,” the other man said flatly.

//I’ll monitor your coms but keep it muted.// Luke told her.

//Will do, Question out.//

Both men watched as the ambulances left and the cops began to tape off the scene.

“We’d better go inside,” Dick said at last. “We can split up, one take care of the security feeds while the other—?”

“Felicity will take care of the security footage on her own,” Oliver said confidently. “We should get to Isabel’s room and search it while we have a chance.”

“You’re sure?” Dick asked, and his nod, agreed, “Okay then, let’s go.”

As they headed down the roof access stairwell, Dick turned to him, “Just so you know, when Batman finds out that you put a gun in Felicity’s hands, he’s going to make your life a living hell.”

“I’m not worried about it.”

“Oh yeah, why’s that?”

“Because hell’s where I live these days anyway,” he said with a hint of aggravation.

Bruce looked down and quickly shut off his phone. He wanted to pick up and immediately grill Felicity about what happened that evening but he had finally managed to get Lucius in a room alone. The minute he landed, Lucius called so that they could go over the situation with Josiah Power, the attorney representing Wayne Publications for the Senate Hearing. Lois had woken up while he was still in the air but her memories of the hearing and her investigation were either completely jumbled or gone altogether.

The doctors couldn’t explain it; it was obvious she wasn’t faking it as there were real neurological
symptoms and blood tests showing that she had a seizure. Unfortunately (or fortunately), they also ruled out drugs so she wasn’t poisoned. At the press conference tomorrow afternoon her attending physician was going to say that the cause of her collapse was most likely a transient ischemic attack, or ‘mini-stroke’.

The symptoms fit, right down to the lack of a blood clot. It was believed that the clot dissolved shortly after the attack which is why they couldn’t find it. The sudden confusion, trouble speaking, severe headache, and her collapse along with the memory loss all but confirmed it. Even though Lois was still a young woman, there was a history of strokes in her family and, up until a year ago, she’d been a heavy smoker. The hospital intended to use this incident as an opportunity to educate the public on their risk for stroke but it didn’t explain the fact that the servers had been hacked.

Right now, the senators on the committee were in an uproar. All of the evidence they had held back was now gone. Even the backup copies that were on Lois’s personal computer as well as Wayne Publishing’s attorney’s PC were gone. They had some hard copies, of course, along with a thumb drive. Josiah Power was old school and believed in backing up his backups, but without Lois’s testimony, Miller was going to claim dirty tricks and he’d most likely win. Unless Luthor decided to sink his ship next week, Miller was going to retire a martyr with a multi-million dollar payout from the paper and a guaranteed prime time gig with Edge News where he would slaughter the reputation of the paper and Wayne Enterprises every chance he got.

Frankly, Bruce had no faith in Luthor doing ‘the right thing’ and testifying. His lawyers were already putting up roadblocks and if he testified to Miller and Mallory’s backroom shenanigans, it could cost his company big time. Power told them that he heard a rumor that Luthor’s attorneys were negotiating a deal to throw Mallory under the bus along with Miller as long as Oversight agreed to find that LuthorCorp was not culpable for Mallory’s actions and that he acted alone but the chances of that being real were slim.

Right now they were just trying to decide whether to stick it out and hope that Lois regained her memory or cut their losses, fire her, and offer Miller a settlement. If that happened, it would be a PR nightmare and he’d have no choice but to clean house from Perry White down and, depending on the numbers, sell the paper. The truth was that the Planet had been losing money steadily for years. Print was swiftly becoming a dying media and, while the Daily Planet had gone digital a while back, they were still barely making a profit. If they lost advertisers over this, circulation alone wasn’t going to make up for the loss.

The only reason Bruce had held on to the paper as long as he had was because the Planet was one of the most respected and award winning publications in the world. Every year their journalists and the stories they covered won accolades and prestige for both them and Wayne Publications as a whole. Lois already had a Pulitzer under her belt and was, until this happened, a shoe-in for another. She’d already been nominated last year for both a Peabody and a Pulitzer over her in-depth coverage of the human trafficking situation in the DRC; her exposé of Miller would have put her over the top for this year’s prize. Now, all of that and more was in serious jeopardy.

The sharks were already smelling the blood in the water. Lane had gone from an asset to a liability in less than a day. The Planet, and Lois specifically, had made a game of attacking Luthor and Edge for years and now both men were putting out feelers to see if Wayne Publications would be willing to sell if, for no other reason, than to be able to fire her personally. Honestly, he’d rather take the loss than sell to either one of those sons of bitches but he really couldn’t bring himself to care about the paper or Lois Lane’s reputation at that moment. He was more worried about Felicity and he hated being in DC when he should be home with her making sure she was safe and that Queen was keeping his hands to himself.
He knew she was still in love with him, she outright told him that she loved both him and Queen equally, so having Queen anywhere near her was setting his teeth on edge. The only thing that helped was the fact that she had agreed to marry him. Still, he didn’t like not being there and he needed to do something to cement his position with her.

He looked at Lucius carefully. The older man was still going over the notes Power left for them relating to the case and the press conference. Felicity specifically told him that she didn’t want him talking to her father until after they’d sorted the mess with Stellmoor but…

Fuck it.

“Lucius, there’s something I’d like to talk to you about while it’s just the two of us…”

“I already know what you’re going to say,” Lucius said, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes wearily, “I know you don’t want to sell to Luthor, and I’m with you on that, but I do think we should consider Edge’s proposal.” Bruce opened his mouth to interrupt but the other man waved him off, “I know, I know; he’s a fascist windbag who is trying to buy respect rather than earn it but he’s offering top dollar. Hell, he’s offering us what the paper was worth in its heyday! I’m not saying we should take it, but we should at least consider it as a last resort.”

“It’s not about the paper--”

“I get it; it’s the principle of the matter,” Lucius agreed. “Like I said, I’m on your side. Perry White has been a good friend of mine since way back when and I know that if Edge takes over he’ll be out of a job along with most of the real journalists at the paper. He’ll move in his cronies from Edge News and turn our crown jewel into some kind of damned right wing propaganda machine, but from a purely financial point of view, it’s hard to turn down these numbers. He’s offering $623 million which is what we were worth back in ‘91 before digital went mainstream. If we sell the paper then we could offer Perry and the others early retirement plus a nice severance or move them to the entertainment division and finally launch that network idea we’ve been kicking around.”

Bruce grimaced, “We’re moving on the network thing anyway and you and I both know that putting old school print journalists in front of a camera is just asking for trouble. As for Edge’s offer, I don’t give a damn if he offers a billion dollars, I’m not selling him the Planet.”

“If we don’t at least look as though we’re giving his offer due consideration he could use it as an excuse to paint you as a flake who makes irrational business decisions and then our stocks really will take a hit,” he offered reasonably.

“Frankly, I could give a crap about Edge and his propaganda machine,” Bruce said bluntly. “He’ll do that anyway whether we sell or not. As for the stocks, they rise and fall with the tides. It’s not like we have any shareholders to worry about besides us and I think we can afford a dip in stock.”

“What about the settlement then?” Lucius asked. “If worse comes to worst and things don’t go our way, this is going to bankrupt the Planet which means people will lose jobs. We’ll have to lay people off and fire the senior staff including Perry White and Lois Lane, Miller will insist on it.”

“It won’t come to that,” Bruce told him. “If it does then we’ll deal with that then, until that point we’ll keep moving forward. It’s been less than a day since this happened which is far too soon to be thinking up doomsday strategies.”

“You and I both know that things happen fast, Bruce,” Lucius told him solemnly. “A day in the real world is a lifetime in the media.”
“I’m not worrying about this until we find out what’s going on,” he told him again. “If we go bankrupt, fine; we’ll restructure, but I refuse to fire a reporter for doing her job. Her bosses at the paper signed off on it and the evidence is there whether the courts accept it or not. If Miller wants to take us to court, so be it; I’ll roll the dice and take my chances but this is what you get into when you hire mavericks like Lane. If I wanted to play it safe I wouldn’t have bought the Planet in the first place; I would’ve bought USAToday or the Metropolis Tribune and we would’ve made do with the same AP stories every other paper in the country is running.”

“Is that your last word on the subject?”

“Yes,” Bruce said firmly.

“Are you still flying home tomorrow afternoon?” Lucius asked. “If so then I can take this to Metropolis and let them know where we stand.”

“I’m…” his jaw clenched, “I don’t really want to go but I want to look into things over there personally.”

“I thought you might,” the older man nodded. “I know your business in Gotham is just as important, if not more so, but I also knew you’d want to see for yourself what was going on.” He stretched and rolled his neck wearily, “Well, if that’s it, I’m going to hit the hay. I have a whole day of dealing with lawyers to contend with--”

“Before you go to bed, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” Bruce said quickly. His expression changed from hard-edged businessman to something significantly less impressive the second Lucius’s curious eyes lighted on him. “It’s about Felicity…”

“Oh, did she accept the job?” He asked curiously.

“No, well, not exactly,” he cleared his throat. “Lucius, I want you to know that your daughter has always been very special to me.”

Lucius’s face stilled and he sat back in the chair, his arms folded across his chest, “Go on.”

Bruce opened his mouth to speak then faltered. The man in front of him, a man he thought of as his friend and almost as a surrogate father, looked calm, cool, and utterly composed. His voice was just as warm and soft-spoken as ever, his posture relaxed, but somehow he was more terrified of this kind, gentle man than he had ever been of anything else in his entire life.

“Bruce? You were saying something about my daughter?” He prompted.

“Um, yes,” he cleared his throat again and fidgeted slightly.

“Is something wrong with your throat?” Lucius asked him, his normally animated gaze gone hard and penetrating.

“My throat?” He asked in confusion.

He gestured toward his own throat, “Do you need some water?”

“No, thank you,” he told him then cleared his throat again before he could stop himself. “Well, maybe…”

“In the mini-fridge,” the other man told him.
“Thank you,” he got up and opened the small refrigerator to pull out a bottle of Perrier. He unscrewed the top of the glass bottle and took a sip, trying not to wince.

He hated Perrier; for some reason sparkling mineral water always had a mildly dirty taste to him but at least it gave him a second to get his thoughts together. He’d had a plan, now all he had to do was execute it.

Lucius hadn’t moved so much as a millimeter; still watching him with that shark-like gaze and unassuming air that made him one of the most successful businessmen in the world.

“I love your daughter,” he said in a single breath then stopped.

Lucius sat back, his elbows resting at his sides and his fingers tented. He said nothing, gave nothing away; he merely waited.

Bruce set the overpriced bottle of French dirt water aside and straightened his posture, “I’m in love with Ba--Felicity.”

Lucius leaned his head back and stayed silent for two long beats before speaking, “Go on.”

Bruce glanced at the water wondering if he should take another drink before slowly walking over to his seat and resting his hand on the chair back, “I’m in love with Felicity…”

“Yes, you said that already,” Lucius said in an almost bored tone.

He straightened his posture, “I intend to marry her,” he told him.

“Do you now?” Lucius drawled.

“I do,” Bruce confirmed, setting his jaw as he attempted to regain control of his senses.

“And is she aware of all this?”

“She is,” he said stiffly. “I asked her to marry me and she said yes.”

“Interesting,” the older man said as he locked his gaze on him. “Because, usually, when a man asks a woman to marry him, it’s after they’ve been seeing each other for a while.”

“You told me you fell in love with Evie at first sight,” he pointed out.

“Yes, but I didn’t watch Evie grow up, did I? Just how long have you had these feelings for my daughter, Bruce?”

He flushed, “Nothing ever happened between myself and Felicity until after she was a consenting adult. I would never betray your trust or hurt her in that manner, nor have I ever--! You should know me well enough to not even have to ask that question,” Bruce said with a hint of anger.

Lucius raised his eyebrow, seemingly unperturbed by his outburst, “I don’t doubt that you are an honorable man, Bruce; I’m just asking when this relationship between the two of you began.”

Bruce shifted uneasily, “Before she left Gotham.”

“Which time? The first time when she left for Starling or the second time when she came back for a visit?”

“The first time,” he admitted.
"A little over four years ago then," Lucius nodded slowly. "You’ve had a few serious relationships since then so I’m assuming that this wasn’t an ongoing relationship?"

"No."

"So when Baby quit her job and suddenly decided to return to Gotham, that was you, I take it?"

Bruce flushed again, "Yes."

"And I’m only just now hearing about this; after four years and however many weeks the two of you have been involved?"

"I tried telling you this morning," Bruce began.

"Hmm," he hummed.

"Lucius, I really do respect your daughter and you," he told him. "Believe it or not, I did…" he grimaced, "I went to you right after…four years ago I came to you and I was going to tell you, but—"

"But Baby suddenly packed up and left town without warning," Lucius finished for him. "She left home and didn’t come back for more than a year then went back to Starling and didn’t come back until a few weeks ago; why is that?"

Bruce looked to the floor guiltily, "I wasn’t expecting anything to happen between us and when it did I didn’t quite know how to process it. I thought that by pushing her away I was saving her."

"Because of the Batman," Lucius offered and Bruce looked at him in surprise. The other man offered him an enigmatic smile, "Come now, Bruce; I don’t believe our usual euphemisms have a place in this particular discussion, do you?" He didn’t bother waiting for his answer, instead he plowed on, "I was your father’s best friend."

"I know that," he said quietly.

The other man nodded, "Your mother and Tanya were best friends as well; they grew up together, went to school together—did you know that?" Again Bruce nodded, "Did you know that I’m the one who introduced your parents to one another?"

"No," he told him. Lucius motioned for him to sit and he obeyed, albeit reluctantly.

The older man waited until he was settled before he began to speak again, "Your father hated running the company. He wasn’t made for it, never wanted it; he was almost done with medical school when your Great-Uncle Silas had his first heart attack and his father, your grandfather, needed help. Silas never married, never had children, and Patrick needed someone he could trust to serve as his right hand. Even though it wasn’t something he ever wanted, he left medicine and went to work. He worked at the company for a few years, growing the business, stabilizing it, then, just before your grandfather was set to retire, he went to him and said that he wanted to finish medical school. He said he’d earned it, he already had degrees in law and business from Yale, neither of which he ever wanted, but if running the family business was to be the rest of his life then he should at least get to earn the one degree he did want before it was too late. Your grandfather agreed because Thomas had increased their profits exponentially through the addition of the biotech division and others, so he let him go back with his blessings."

"I was going to Morton and Tanya and Martha were both freshmen at Wesleyan. There was this little café about halfway between the schools called the City Diner where all the students hung out. One day I walk in and I see this gorgeous girl and I just know I need to talk to her so I walk up and try to
strike up a conversation. Tanya, however, takes one look at me and decides that’s not going to happen but I’m persistent. She finally agrees to go out on a date with me but only if I can make it a double date and find someone for her friend. I tell her, sure, but she stops me. She says it has to be a good guy who I can trust and I tell her about my best friend, the medical student. She and Martha are both in the medical program so that gets their attention. She asks me, ‘So who is this friend of yours?’ Well, I look around and there’s your dad reading a medical textbook and sitting by himself so I point him out then tell the girls to hang on a minute while I go talk to my buddy.” He smiles slightly, “I walk right up to this man I’d never seen in my life and ask him to help me out. I explain the situation real quick and he looks over at your mother and says ‘Okay, now what was your name again, friend?’”

He chuckled, “Your parents fell in love within the first five minutes of meeting each other and were married a few months after that. I was his best man when he married your mother and he was mine when I married Tanya. When you were born, Tanya was named your godmother, and I named Tamara after your father. When they died, your parents put Alfred down as your legal guardian but said that should he choose not to accept that responsibility that you were to come to me and Tanya, did you know that?”

“Yes,” he nodded.

“Good, then you should also know that one of the worst fights Tanya and I ever had was over you,” he said solemnly. “She wanted to fight Alfred for custody and I refused even though the social worker on your case had already hinted strongly that she’d sign off on it if we did. It wasn’t that we or anyone else thought he was unfit, she just wanted you to be with us and the social worker wasn’t sure that he could be both your parent and your employee. Tanya and your caseworker both thought that you needed the stability and structure an old bachelor like Alfred couldn’t provide. We, on the other hand, had been married a while, we hadn’t had any children of our own yet, and you’d known us your entire life.”

“I went to Alfred with her and we asked but he said that we had enough on our plates what with her running the Foundation and me running the business. He said he should take care of ‘young Master Bruce’ because that was his role to play; he would teach and guide you while we secured your legacy. Tanya disagreed; she offered to leave the Foundation, stay at home full time, but I didn’t want to step on Alfred’s toes so I told her to drop it. When she threatened to hire a lawyer, I put my foot down and that was that.”

He inhaled deeply and pressed his lips together, “I often wonder now what would’ve happened if we had gone against Alfred and gotten custody. Tanya wanted to send you to counselling, keep you home; she hated that Alfred sent you to that boarding school. She would have kept you close, been the mother you desperately needed, and every time I see you in that suit, I wonder if I did you a grave disservice by not allowing her to have her way.”

He looked at him steadily, “When you took up this mission I supported you because, even though I disagreed with your methods, I knew this was something you needed to do. I failed your parents and you once already. I wasn’t going to fail you a second time. If I could go back in time I would have taken you in as my own, raised you, loved you like my own child, but I can’t do that. I do at least hope that I was able to provide you with what you needed otherwise.”

“Lucius…” Bruce began.

“Let me speak,” he told him with a note of steel in his tone. “Your father was the kindest, most honorable man I have ever known and I thought you had inherited that from him. I certainly hoped that I was able to be something of a role model to you in that respect. A little while back I gave you
the opportunity to come clean with me about your relationship with Baby. I thought, wrongly it turns out, that you hadn’t yet come to grips with your feelings for her. I was willing then to talk this out with you, come to some kind of understanding, and either dissuade you from pursuing her or, if you really wanted to have a relationship with her, convince you to give up this damned crusade once and for all. Now it turns out that this has been going on under my nose for years.”

“It wasn’t like that,” he began.

“What is it like then?”

“I love her,” he told him firmly. “I asked her to marry me over the weekend and came to you first thing this morning to tell you about it.”

“Four years too late,” Lucius supplied.

His jaw clenched, “I should have come to you sooner, yes, but I’m here now. This isn’t something cheap and tawdry, Lucius. I haven’t been hiding anything from you. Yes, we had a brief moment four years ago but our relationship really began when she came back home a few weeks ago.” He took a moment, “I know it seems fast, but I’ve never stopped loving her. I tried staying away, I kept my distance for the very same reasons you just mentioned, but I can’t do that anymore. I want this, I want her, and we’re getting married.”

“What exactly do you want from me then, Bruce?” The older man asked in a disaffected voice.

“Your blessing,” he told him quietly.

“Not going to happen.”

“Not for me,” Bruce spoke up, his own steel coming out, “For Felicity.”

“If my daughter wants to marry you then she needs to tell me, not you,” Lucius told him. “You should have come to me *before* this ever got started and let me know that you intended to pursue my daughter. Now that it’s done, I really have no say in anything, do I? Not that I did before,” he added. “Felicity is a grown woman and can make her own decisions. She knows about your mission, she knows all your secrets, so I really have nothing to do with it.” His eyes grew cold, “However, I’ve seen what happens to the women you bring into your circle and I don’t want that happening to my daughter, do you hear me?”

“Felicity isn’t like the others,” he told him.

“No, she isn’t,” Lucius affirmed. “She's special, she feels more, she isn’t jaded like the other women you’ve associated with in the past. You break her and you’ll be destroying something precious in this world and then I will be forced to deal with the consequences of those actions.” His voice became low and mildly threatening, “And don’t think that just because I’m an old man that I can’t take you down in a heartbeat.”

“I have no intentions of hurting her,” Bruce said quietly, a slight growl of the Bat leeching into his tone.

“You’d better not,” he told him flatly, “because, if you do, I will set your entire world on fire, do you hear me?”

“I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe,” he said intensely. “I would break my back for her, sacrifice my life and my freedom, and do whatever needs to be done to make her happy.”
Lucius didn’t look convinced however, “Maybe you would, but what about the Bat? You’re getting older, Bruce. I won’t make an issue of the age gap between you because that would make me a hypocrite, but time has a way of slowing us down. One day you’re going to be just a little too slow, just a few seconds too late; then what? Will you make my daughter a widow? Orphan my grandchildren? Or worse, go to prison and make her pay for your crimes with her freedom and reputation? You can’t be married to the mission and to my daughter at the same time; it won’t work.”

“I’m giving it up,” he told him.

“When?”

“Soon,” he said.

“How soon?”

“I have one more bit of business to settle and then I’m handing it to Dick,” he told him in a low voice. “It could be days, it could be a few weeks, but I swear to you that I’m done being the Batman. I told Baby I wanted to get married in six weeks and I intend to retire the cowl before that happens.”

“Six weeks?” Lucius said with an arched eyebrow. “And what does Baby say?”

He paused, “She wants to wait until everything is settled. She actually didn’t even want me to talk to you until that was done first.”

Lucius snorted, “First off, if you want my approval then it’ll take a hell of a lot longer than six weeks to get it. Second, I’ll believe it when I see it and not before.”

“You moved in with Evie within a week of meeting her,” Bruce pointed out.

“Felicity isn’t Evie,” he shot back. “Besides, you’re already living with Felicity, aren’t you?” At the darkening of Bruce’s expression, he offered him a cool smile, “I thought so. Is that the real reason you offered her the penthouse? To figure out a way to shack up without my finding out?”

“No,” he said quickly. “I offered her the penthouse in order for her to update Watchtower.”

“Don’t try to bullshit me, Bruce,” he warned. “It was a power move; you wanted my daughter so you gave her your penthouse in order to take a power position.”

“No,” he said firmly. “Even if I tried doing that, Baby would never let me get away with it. In fact, she’s one of the few people I can’t intimidate and you should know that by now.”

A hint of humor flitted across his expression for a split second, “You may have a point,” he conceded.

“And, for the record, we aren’t ‘shacked up’ or playing house,” he told him with a hard look. “Yes, I asked Felicity to move into the manor with me but she wouldn’t agree until after I spoke to you. Just so you know though, whether you get on board or not, she’s moving in and I’m marrying her as soon as I can get her to agree to it. I told you that I’m in love with your daughter and I meant it; I’d marry her tomorrow if I could. I wanted to marry her four years ago but I let her go because I thought I was doing the right thing; I don’t intend to make the same mistake twice.”

Lucius shifted in his chair slightly, “So you’re really giving up the mission? You expect me to believe that?”

“I’m not entirely giving it up,” he admitted. “I am taking a less physical role though. I want to focus
more on recruitment and expansion but leave the actual day to day mission to others. Luke, Dick, and Tim can handle it without me.”

Lucius nodded slowly, “And what about children?”

“We want them.”

Lucius shook his head, “I’ve seen what happens to the children you take in, Bruce…”

“No,” he told him. “We’ve already talked it out and that’s not going to happen.”

“Really?” He said dubiously.

“Really,” he confirmed. “We talked about everything; the fact that she and I both want to adopt but that we also want biological children if possible. We’ve agreed we don’t want to wait more than a year before we start building our family, possibly sooner. We even discussed religion and the fact that we want to raise our children with the traditions of both of our families.” He looked the older man in the eye, “I know I’ve made a lot of mistakes and gone about this the wrong way, I know that it’s fast, and I know I’ve said this several times already, but I love your daughter. If that means giving up the mission then so be it.”

The other man sat back, his expression giving nothing away. Seconds ticked by and Bruce found himself in the unique position of actually feeling a bit nervous. Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, he spoke, “I believe you mean that, Bruce. I know you love her and that she loves you but Baby isn’t like other people.”

“I know that.”

“No, you don’t,” he told him. “You can’t possibly know what I mean by that.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” he said firmly.

He took a deep breath and tented his fingers again, “With Tam and Luke we always knew exactly what they were thinking or feeling; they laughed, they cried, they screamed and fought, Baby didn’t. She was quiet. She would smile and giggle every once in a while, but she could go days without speaking. I wasn’t worried about it, her mother was the same way, but it scared the hell out of Tanya. Then, one day, she started rambling and that became her new quiet. I know why she did it; Tanya didn’t, but I did. She did it because it made people happy and it made ‘Mama T’ feel better. She never had to hide from me, though. She was my special baby and I raised her. She spent time with Tanya and Peggy, God knows I couldn’t have managed without them, but Tam and Luke always took the lion’s share of their attention and Baby was happy to give that to them. Instead, I was the one she spent most of her time with. She was my world, Bruce, and I was hers. I know my child better than anyone else and I can tell you right now that she won’t survive the kind of life you’re offering her. Loving you would eventually destroy her.”

“I would never put her in danger, Lucius; not unless I absolutely had to,” he said in a low undertone. “Even then, I would do everything I could to protect her.”

“I know that,” he said. “I also know that Baby doesn’t do anything she doesn’t want to do, but I’m not talking about the mission this time. Believe it or not, I’m less worried about her being a part of the Bat’s world than I am about her being a part of yours.”

He furrowed his brow in confusion, “I don’t think I’m understanding what it is that you’re trying to say.”
He leaned forward slightly, “I’m talking about the fact that you’re also Bruce Wayne and he’s just as much a danger to my daughter as the Bat in some ways, if not more so.” Lucius sat back and tilted his head slightly, “We both know that you’re more Batman than Bruce Wayne, you’ve treated that identity like a cover for years, made a spectacle of yourself in the press, and there are consequences to that.”

He flushed, “I haven’t been in the gossip pages in years, not since before Damian came to live with me and you know that. I purposefully stopped being the ‘playboy’ back then because I no longer saw the need for it and, after Damian passed, they published a few stories about my ‘tragic loss’ then left me alone for the most part. The only thing I’ve been in since then is the business section.”

“But you’re still a high profile man with a well-publicized past and she’s never been in the spotlight. I shielded her as best I could but she deliberately avoided it as much as she could as well. Even when she was acting as Queen’s EA, her name and picture never ran in the paper; not once. Believe me, I checked.”

“That’s impossible,” Bruce said taken aback. “He’s probably been in the papers more than I have and she was by his side practically 24/7.”

“And yet she was never once photographed with him,” he shrugged. “I have my EA track the social media alerts for whenever my or my family's names pop up and I started subscribing to all of the Starling and Central City papers when Felicity moved to the West Coast so I could see what was happening down there for myself. She isn’t in a single one of the pictures with Queen or his family. Even when his mother was running for office, she managed to avoid the photographers and, as far as I know, no one ever connected the dots between Felicity Smoak, his EA, and Felicity Fox, my daughter.”

"Are you sure?" Bruce frowned. When the other man nodded, he said, “But how?"

He shook his head, “I don’t know; Baby was always very good at keeping out of sight even as a child. She’s always preferred to remain in the background but she won’t be able to do that anymore, not as Mrs. Wayne. The life you’re offering her comes at a steep price, Bruce. She won’t ever be able to leave the house without people tearing her down, questioning her every gesture, her face splashed across the garbage rags,” he shook his head in disgust. “Even when her mother was dying they vilified her to the point that I was tempted to buy up all the papers just so I could fire the columnists who were spreading those lies. Evie, however, never cared about what they said so I let it go. Felicity though, she’s a lot more sensitive than her mother ever was. She cares about what people think and say, and she’s always avoided making a spectacle out of herself as a result. She doesn’t have a thick skin like Tam and Luke, and she’ll never let you see the tears or the pain, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t there.” He sighed and looked at him with kind, wizened eyes, “You’re a good man, Bruce, but you’re selfish in the same way I was when I married Tanya. I nearly destroyed her before we got divorced and I’m afraid that if you marry my daughter that she’ll lose herself to your cause in the same way Tanya nearly lost herself to mine. We’re mirror images of each other, son. I might not wear a suit and fight criminals but I was just as obsessed with running Wayne Enterprises as you are with your mission. Just like me, you’ll never even notice the pain she feels because of who and what you are. It will always be about you, about what you need, about what she has to do to make your life work.”

“I would never let that happen,” he said with a grimace.

Lucius chuckled humorlessly, “It won’t be your choice to make, son. She’ll do it because it’s in her nature to want to make people happy and to fix what’s broken even if it means destroying herself in the process.”
His words hit him like closed fists and he shut his eyes for a moment as he absorbed them. He wasn’t wrong; even without knowing the protocols he’d set up for Felicity all those years ago he somehow managed to figure out exactly what he was planning. Still, he had changed; he wasn’t the same man looking for a marriage of convenience. He loved her and he was no longer afraid to admit that.

Steeling his resolve, he spoke, “I’m just here out of courtesy, Lucius; I’m not asking for your permission. I know I’m not good enough for her and that I never will be. I could sit here all night and try to convince you of my sincerity and commitment towards her but I won’t. I’d like your blessing but, like you said, it’s not your choice to make; it’s hers, and she’s already made it.”

Lucius nodded again, not angry or upset, merely accepting, “So, I suppose you’ll be using the Charity Gala as your coming out to the press?”

“No,” Bruce cleared his throat. “Actually Felicity wants us to keep our relationship under wraps until after we settle a few things related to the mission.”

“Oh?”

There was so much weight to that one syllable.

“Like I said before, she didn’t even want me coming to speak to you just yet, but I knew I needed to at least tell you, man to man, where I stood.”

“I can appreciate that,” Lucius got up from his chair and offered him his hand which Bruce took in a firm grip. “However,” the older man said, not releasing his hand right away and pinning him with his dark gaze, “when this ‘business’ is done, I expect you and my daughter to both come to the house for dinner so I can hear all of this from her as well. If after Peggy, Tanya, and myself have said what we need to say, if she’s still on-board with this engagement, I’ll give you my blessing then and we’ll figure out the logistics of all this together.”

“Thank you,” he said sincerely before releasing his hand.

“Even if I give my blessings, this will have to be handled carefully, you realize that, right?” He told him. “This Miller business needs to be settled for one and we’ll have to consult with PR. I know you want a quickie wedding, but that can’t happen.”

“I don’t see why not,” he said irritably. “If we want to get married in six weeks then--”

The older man offered him a superior look, “If you rush my daughter to the altar then every two-bit paparazzo will be on baby bump watch for the next nine months. So unless there is a reason why they should be looking…?”

“Felicity’s not pregnant,” he said tightly. “Not as far as I know, anyway.”

Lucius’s eyes flashed dangerously and Bruce immediately regretted his words, “See to it she stays that way otherwise you and I are going to have another very lengthy discussion that won’t be ending in a handshake.”

He shifted his stance slightly, “We’ve already agreed that should that happen we’ll get married immediately.”

“How about we just agree not to make that a possibility to begin with, hmm?” Lucius told him with a tight smile.

“Understood,” Bruce nodded.
Lucius straightened his posture, matching Bruce in height as well as strength of will, “I’ll talk to Tanya but I think six months would be a more acceptable waiting period. Once this business of yours is settled and I know Baby is on board, we’ll release a press announcement. We’ll try to keep things low key but we’ll have to start making the wedding preparations as soon as possible if you want to get this done quickly. It doesn’t have to be extravagant but we will need to invite some members of the press and these things always turn into something of a dog and pony show no matter what you do.”

“We were actually hoping to just do a Justice of the Peace and some cake at the manor.”

He fixed him with a disapproving eye, “Bruce, while I am Felicity’s father I am also the CEO of your company and how this whole thing plays out directly affects both your reputation and our bottom line,” he told him succinctly. “If you try pulling off some quickie wedding in your front parlor or sneak off to some judges chamber, two things are going to happen: First, the public and the press will completely lose faith in you and chalk this up to yet another ‘Bruce Wayne Playboy Escapade’, only instead of some random model or starlet it will be the youngest daughter of Wayne Enterprise’s CEO at the center of the media storm. Even the Miller thing will be nothing compared to how this will go down if we don’t play our cards right. Tongues will wag, anxieties will surface, and our stocks will take a hit for the next several months as our contracts disappear and the public waits to see if you’re going to tear your entire company apart because you couldn’t keep your pants zipped. I doubt either of you want that much scrutiny placed upon you.”

“Fine,” Bruce growled, “Six months and we’ll do it at First Episcopal. With a Rabbi co-officiating so both sides are represented.”

Lucius seemed to mull that over, “I’ll run it past Tanya. Of course, Peggy will put up a fuss but unless you’re planning on converting--?”

“I’m not,” he said firmly. “Felicity and I already discussed it and, like I said, we agreed that there should be room for both families’ traditions at the table.”

“Fair enough. I’ll also let her know that you want an intimate ceremony; close family and friends only. We’ll make the press corps happy by inviting a few of the more high profile members as witnesses. Bob Parker and Nancy Gibbs with Time and Newsweek, Peterson James from Gotham Living, Sal Nance from the Tribune, and we can have Clark Kent come in from the Daily Planet once everything settles down.”

“Kent,” he said narrowing his eyes, “Isn’t he Lane’s partner? He’s an investigative journalist, not a society columnist.”

“He’s got a solid reputation and he plays fair,” Lucius told him. “But you’re right, we’ll have to offer him some meat on the bone.” For the first time since speaking, the older man looked mildly reticent, “I’ve been working with Dan Burney long enough to know what kind of strategy he’ll suggest if we want to keep the press in line.”

“Which is?” He asked, already not liking where he was heading.

“You said it yourself; you dropped out of the gossip rags following Damian’s death. He’ll want to build on that and paint you as a changed man who after the death of his son decided to live a simpler life outside of the spotlight.”

His jaw clenched, “I’m not overly enthused about using the death of my son to create positive spin for my wedding to Felicity. I don’t think either of us would be willing to build our lives together by stepping on his grave like that, nor should anyone expect us to.”
“I don’t blame you but if you want to marry my daughter and not make her a target then you have to give the press something else to focus on.”

Although he hated to admit it, he was right.

"Fine," Bruce nodded sharply, "I can place a call to Vicki Vale at the appropriate time and offer her a local exclusive so the Gotham Gazette doesn’t skewer us in the press."

“Are you still on good terms with her?” Lucius asked.

“Better than with most of my exes.”

“Schedule her interview to coincide with Gotham Living’s so we don’t get into a pissing contest between both publications,” Lucius told him. “I’ll coordinate with Danny when we get back into town, discretely of course, and we’ll start preparing on our end. If everything goes well and we can put this Miller thing to bed, we’ll fly in Kent along with one of their staff photographers and set something up at the manor or the penthouse; your choice. We’ll make sure the whole family is present; it paints a better picture since this is going national. Tim and Dick will need to be present for that.”

“I’ll ask Dick but there might be a scheduling conflict with Tim since he’s going to be in Starling for the next little while,” Bruce said with a scowl. “I’ll see what we can work out.”

“Who do you want to do the TV interview?”

“I don’t care, just pick someone,” Bruce said in a less than enthusiastic manner as he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose in order to ward off the headache that was beginning to develop with each passing second.

“Cat Grant?”

Bruce looked up at him, his lips curled up in disgust, “And have Morgan Edge’s mistress digging for dirt? I’d rather not.”

“Bruce, I know you hate to do press but you have to give me something to work with here,” Lucius said irritably. “What about Snapper Carr? He’s more of an investigative reporter but he has a high TV Q and he’s basically in-house since his network is in negotiations to be bought out by Wayne Entertainment.”

“Fine,” Bruce said with a hint of a growl, “But if I’m going to have to play the role of grieving father in front of a national audience he can’t snap his fingers at me every five seconds. This interview had better be handled with dignity and respect and not like it’s being conducted by some long haired man-child with an uncontrollable tick. The first time he does it I’m walking off the set, I don’t give a damn if it’s his signature move or not.”

“That sounds reasonable, I’ll let his producer know,” Lucius nodded. “If they have a problem with it then we’ll offer it to another reporter. I’m sure we could even convince Iris West to come out and do it if we have to.”

“Who the hell is Iris West?” Bruce scowled.

“She’s another up and coming journalist out of the West Coast. Remember? She’s the one who did that piece about the incident at STAR labs and the sudden emergence of metahumans last year.”

He made a disgruntled noise in acknowledgement.
Lucius ignored him, “I’d like to keep this to the ‘legitimate press’ as much as possible and using a journalist not affiliated with Wayne Publishing makes it look like we’re being open and not just sticking with people we know.”

He pinned Lucius with a stern look, “You do realize that Felicity might have something to say about all this? She might not appreciate the fact that we’re making all these decisions without her.”

He shrugged, “I don’t think she’ll have a problem with it but we’ll ask before we do anything. Felicity is extremely level-headed and she was Oliver Queen’s assistant throughout his mother’s trial. She understands spin-doctoring so it shouldn't take a lot to convince her. That is, if the two of you are serious about going through with this, of course.”

“I assure you that we're both very serious and equally determined to see this through,” Bruce told him.

“Good, remember that when someone like Snapper Carr pisses you off in front of the cameras,” he said sternly. “Consider this your marriage gauntlet; if you can’t hack it, or put up with some ‘long-haired man child’ snapping his fingers, then you won’t be able to handle the real thing when the time comes.”

“Understood,” he replied gruffly.

“Also, I’ll be hiring her a lawyer to go over your prenup.”

“We weren’t planning on getting a prenup,” Bruce said dismissively.

The older man offered him another cool look, “Felicity is getting a prenup and, believe you me, there will be some very generous contingencies in it, all of which will favor her, understood?” He waited for Bruce to nod reluctantly. “In addition to that, we will be getting you two corporate life insurance policies naming Felicity and any children you have as your beneficiaries and you’re having a new will drawn up to make sure that if you should have children with my daughter that they are taken care of. I don’t care if you give the lion’s share to Tim and Dick, but I want my daughter and grandchildren to be legally acknowledged as your heirs.”

“I was planning on doing that anyway,” he agreed.

“Good, because now that I know that you intend to have children with Baby, I plan on doing the same and the prenup will reflect that any and all inheritance she or your children receive from my estate will not count as marital property and will remain separate. Furthermore, I want it in writing that should you divorce, no matter who instigates the proceedings, that you will maintain both those policies and not attempt to cut my grandchildren out of your will for any reason. If you do then there will be a stiff penalty attached. A very stiff penalty,” he emphasized.

“First of all, if we have children then I will acknowledge them as mine whether it’s in writing or not. Secondly, even if I do agree to it, that type of codicil isn’t enforceable,” Bruce told him.

“Figure out a way to make it enforceable,” he told him. “Better yet, don’t hurt her and it won’t become an issue to begin with.”

“Yes sir,” he nodded.

“Now call my daughter back,” Lucius told him pointedly. “Let her know that I expect her to call me tomorrow after the press conference.”

“I will, goodnight,” he said, accepting his obvious dismissal with a nod.
“One more thing,” Lucius said, calling him back. Bruce looked on curiously as the older man smiled at him, “Have you ever heard of the parent’s curse?”

Bruce looked confused for a moment, “I don’t believe I have, no.”

“Then let me enlighten you,” he said slowly. “Someday you and my daughter will have a child of your own. When that happens I hope you have a beautiful little girl who is the spitting image of Baby in every way and that you’ll love and raise her to be a smart, kind, and generous human being like her mother.” He smiled, “And when she becomes an adult I hope she meets and falls in love with a man *exactly* like you.” He watched as Bruce’s brow furrowed in contemplation of that. “Sleep well, son; I’ll see you at breakfast.”

“Goodnight,” he said again before heading out the door. As soon as he stepped into the corridor he released the breath he didn’t even realize he’d been holding.

As much as he hated to admit it, Tim was right.

Not even the Batman was a match for Lucius Fox when it came to his daughters.

“Are you sure this is her room?”

They had been searching Isabel’s place for several minutes and all they’d found were some clothes and some QC documents.

“I’m sure,” Oliver told him.

The other man turned from his work to glance at him, “Hey, Bruce said someone put a hit on Baby; did you ever find anything on that? Could it have been this Isabel who hired them?”

“It’s possible,” Oliver admitted. “At this point it could be anyone. I was also working on another angle but it was a dead end.”

“What was it?”

“That maybe someone had seen her picture in the paper when she was standing next to me and targeted her because of it.”

//Nice theory, but Baby's picture wasn't in any of the papers.//

“What?” He frowned, “Of course it was.”

//Nope., Luke told him. //I had a similar theory so I ran it through Watchtower a little while ago; you and Felicity weren’t in a single picture together and her name was never mentioned in any articles or in the news reports coming out of Starling City.//

“Watchtower is wrong then.”

“Trust me, Watchtower is never wrong,” Dick said ruefully. “Baby and Barbara designed it together.”

“Can’t be,” Oliver thought back to every time he’d been at a press event and wracked his brain to try to remember whether or not Felicity was standing next to him but came up empty.

Even at his mother’s political events she always stayed in the background away from the crowd or
behind the stage. She was always there but never near any of the cameras.

“Damn, why didn’t I notice that before?”

//Don’t feel bad, Baby always was camera shy. Hey guys? I’m going to unmute the feeds.//

“Why?” Dick asked curiously.

//Just listen.//

Laurel’s voice came over Question’s com link, //..we’ll have the garlic bread with cheese, make that a double order with double cheese. The tomato and mozzarella app, three cheddar and apple salads —no nuts, with the vinaigrette. Add chicken to that, double chicken, and no nuts. I know I said that already but we have someone with a food allergy here so if I find a nut I won’t be happy. Great. Okay, ooh, give me a three of those Mediterranean salads and three Tre Colori, a double order of the Garlic Shrimp Linguine, the Linguine and Mushrooms in Truffle Sauce, some of the Pappardelle al Fugi with Chicken in Carbonara Sauce, the ravioli—you know what, forget everything I said and just give me two of everything on the pasta menu along with everything else I’ve already ordered. Yes, I’m serious; why wouldn’t I be serious about something like that?//

“Jeez,” Dick snickered.

“That’s Laurel,” Oliver said in confusion. “Why is she ordering that much food this late at night?”

//Nope, not done yet; hang on. How do you guys feel about pineapple?//

//That it doesn’t belong on a pizza.//

//Couldn’t have said it better myself,// Luke muttered.

“I like pineapple on pizza,” Dick said off-handedly.

//You can share with her then,// Luke muttered.

“Are we sharing?” He asked, “That’s a lot of food for just the three of them.”

//Fine, I’ll eat that one. Hey, are you still there? Great. Okay, I want the pineapple and ham—it does have ham, right? No? Can you add ham? Canadian bacon, ham, whatever. Double ham? Great, but I want the Big Pineapple to be a personal size, everything else is large. Is there anything bigger than a large? Okay, fine, anyway, I want a Classica with double meat, the El Greco but add some meat to it. I don’t care what kind as long as it’s not anchovy. Yeah, grilled chicken is fine. The Formaggio Bianco, put meat on that, too. In fact, I want meat on everything. Just tons and tons of meat, okay? Double it.//

Dick and Oliver exchanged looks while Luke started to chuckle.

//Damn, that girl sure does like her meat, huh?//

//Oooh, the Meat Lover’s, yes! Can you do double meat on that? Yeah, I don’t care what it costs. The Meatball Classic double it plus pepperoni, and the Parma. Hey, do you guys do that thing where you put a pizza on top of a pizza? You know where it’s like a double crust thing? I want tons of bread.//

//I thought West Coast girls were all into juice fasts and tofu,// Luke said still chuckling. //That girl can eat!/
No, hell no! I want the kind with the gluten! Put extra gluten in it! Well, fine, the regular amount of gluten then. No, no wheat crust or thin crust, I want crust, just unhealthy regular crust—in fact, if you can double the cheese, the meat, the crust, plus stuff it—Yeah, all of them. No, not done yet; I’ll tell you when I’m done okay?/

“Extra gluten?” Dick said in confusion as he rummaged through one of Isabel’s drawers. “Can you even add gluten to pizza crust?”

Oliver shrugged, “I don’t even know what the hell gluten is.”

//I think it has something to do with yeast,// Luke offered.

//Oh, and sandwiches!//

Luke paused, //Wait, how many people *is* she ordering for? Are we supposed to meet them for dinner? Have either of you guys talked to Baby yet because I haven’t?//

“Nope.”

Dick looked over toward Oliver curiously and he shrugged, “I wasn’t even sure they knew I was in town yet.”

“Question, are we supposed to head over there after we’re done tossing Isabel’s place?” The other man asked.

//Hang on. Is she just ordering for the three of us or…?//

//She just got out of a ninety day treatment program where all they fed her was grass juice.//

//Ouch.,// Luke said in sympathy.

//Fuck.//

“Grass shakes, really?” Dick repeated.

“I knew her mom was dating some guy who was into veganism but I didn’t know Laurel had gotten into it,” Oliver said slowly.

//If she was into it before, she sure as hell ain’t anymore.//

//Why the hell is everybody putting chipotle on everything? You’re an Italian place; if I wanted to order Mexican food I would have. Leave that crap off.//

“She’s right about the chipotle,” Dick said with a look of disgust. “Just once I’d like to order a sandwich and not have to ask them to leave that crap off of it.”

//I like it.,// Luke said. //Gives it a little kick.//

//Anyway, give me a Chicken Parm on a Hero—oh, how big are they? Like big-big or…? No, big is good. Can you double the meat on those, too? Yeah, I know you said they were big, I still want the meat. Okay, I also want the Grilled Chicken Caesar on Pita, and the Meatball Hero, double up on those, too. Oh, and dessert—what? No, we don’t need the catering menu; it’s just for three people. No THREE.//

“Guess that answers your question about how many people they’re ordering for,” Dick smirked.
I don’t care, I’m still heading up as soon as you guys are ready to come back in.//

The other man lifted a large phallus shaped object from a lingerie drawer then dropped it quickly. “Jesus,” he said staring down at it in horror, “did you see the size of that thing?”

Oliver glanced over at the black latex and leather thing in question, “That’s average,” he shrugged.

“For who?” Dick demanded. “And why does it have a harness attached?”

“Really?” He asked dryly.

“Oh,” the other man said, giving it a second look. “Damn, Tim’s going to hate that he missed this one.”


“Other than a really big dildo, not much,” Dick told him.

//What?//

//A big what?// Question laughed

//Sandwich,// Felicity offered, causing Dick and Luke to snicker and Oliver to roll his eyes and sigh.

//No, we don’t have the munchies and I don’t know where you can score some weed; Jesus!//

“Where the hell are they ordering from?” Oliver snorted.

//Sounds like Aparo’s. Now did you say ‘dildo’, because…?//

//Do I need to get the manager on the phone? Well, it wasn’t funny, now where was I? Oh, three bread puddings, three cheese cakes—hey, are there nuts in the cookies or in the brownies?//

“I love their brownies,” Dick muttered. “That was the one thing I missed most when I left Gotham.”

//They’ve got nuts though and Baby’s allergic.//

“That’s right,” Dick said quickly. “Hey Question, tell Laurel--!”

//Damn, oh well.//

“Never mind,” he said, moving toward the bed.

//Hey, can you get me the whole tiramisu? Like the whole thing? Again, don’t care, just give me my cake. Oh, and three diet cokes.//

“Diet Coke? After all that?” Nightwing said incredulously.

“My sister does it, too; something about food guilt,” Oliver said as he bent down to look under the bed frame.

//Why are you laughing? You know, this is very unprofessional—no this isn’t a crank call! Just tell me how much I owe you? Damn; six hundred what? Is that with the tip?//

//Yikes,// Luke hissed. //Damn, I hope Baby’s still got Bruce’s AmEx Black.//

“He gave her his card?” Dick asked with a frown.
“Actually, she stole it. Hey, help me with this,” Oliver told him as they shifted the mattress.

“Okay. Okay if I use AmEx? Good, here’s my number, it’s…//

The other man looked up in a mixture of curiosity and amusement as they eased the mattress off the box spring, “Why’d she steal his card?”

//He and Queen got into a brawl and wrecked her house so she boosted his wallet.//

“Really?” Dick asked.

Oliver sighed, “It’s a long story.”

//Wait, is she seriously just ordering for the three of you or what?// Luke asked. //Because I really don’t want to drink a diet anything. Tell her I want mine regular.//

//She’s not actually going to eat all of that, is she?// They heard Question ask.

//Maybe not the salads,// Felicity said. //I think those were for us and the rest is for her.//

//Bullshit, not even I can eat that much.//

//No way.// Question snorted.

“Unbelievable,” Dick muttered as they slid the mattress back into place after coming up empty. “Vents?”

“On it,” Oliver said, dragging a chair over and pulling out a small pouch of tools from one of his pockets.

Felicity’s voice came back over the coms, //Ask her about rehab and you’ll see what I mean. I wouldn’t recommend it however.//

//I went to rehab. It wasn’t that bad…other than having to clean toilets and saying the friggin’ Serenity Prayer every five minutes.//

//She went to vegan rehab with hot yoga and they wouldn’t let her have caffeine, sugar, salt, meat, or gluten and, apparently, the only way she could have coffee is if they shoved it up her ass.//

Dick and Oliver froze.

//Do they really do that in rehab?!// Luke asked aghast.

“They don’t really do that, do they?” The other man asked slowly.

“Why are you asking me?” Oliver threw back.

“I just figured it was a West Coast thing.”

“No, not a ‘West Coast thing’.”

//God. *Damn*. //

//Exactly.//

“You know,” Dick began slowly, “Tim has been complaining for years about how he gets pulled into ‘girl talk’ with Barbara, Tam, and Baby and the stuff they say when we’re not around, but I
never really believed him until now.”

//I did.// Luke said. //They’re my sisters, remember?//

//Why do you have Bruce Wayne’s AmEx Black?//

Question snorted, //That’s the question you ask? Not why she’s living in his apartment, just why she has his card? Speaking of which…?//=

//This should be good.// Luke muttered.

Oliver paused in unscrewing the bolts holding down the air vent, “You can mute the coms again, Batwing. We don’t need to keep listening in on a private conversation.”

//Maybe you don’t but I’m kind of interested in what my sister has to say.//

“I’ll admit I’m a bit curious myself,” Dick said from the bathroom where he was going through the drawers and linen closet.

//That’s a long story but the card I lifted from his wallet because he deserved it, but it’s okay because he trashed my house and was being a dick.//

“Well, even though I disapprove of the terminology, she’s not wrong,” the other man admitted and Oliver smiled in spite of himself.

//Afterwards he let me have it anyway so it’s not even a crime or anything.//

//You stole Bruce Wayne’s wallet?//

//She stole like eighty-six thousand dollars from my ex’s personal account when he pissed her off the last time and I’ve seen her drain a bad guy’s bank account of millions in less than a couple of minutes.//

Oliver froze.


“Yes,” Oliver said shortly. “Okay, go ahead and mute the coms.”

“No wait,” Dick said, leaning against the door frame, “Luke’s right; this is just starting to get good.”

//What are you guys; like a couple of high-end thieves? You’re the computer expert and she’s the muscle?//

//Not exactly. You knew about that?//

//About how you paid everybody’s bills, my dad’s mortgage, and bought all of that stuff for the guys out of the ‘team fund’?// Oliver winced. //Yeah, Ollie was looking through it on his tablet and when I asked him what was up he told me you were probably just taking care of some stuff. I actually got a little pissed off about it because he told me he wasn’t even going to ask you about it; he was just planning on letting it go.//

//Why was Baby embezzling money pay your team’s bills?// Luke asked him.

“They were hurt and she just needed to take care of some stuff; no big deal,” Oliver told him gruffly. “Now shut it down.”
Actually, the whole point of me taking the money out of his personal account was so that he would say something.

He ran his hand over his mouth in aggravation, “I mean it; shut it down now,” he growled.

Don’t think so, Luke said with a slight edge.

It wasn’t his fault, you know. Laurel told her, I’m the one who blocked your calls and erased all your voicemails from his phone.

Oliver’s breath caught in his throat and he stilled.

“Maybe we should stop this,” Dick said quietly.

Or not.

Crap. Talk about awkward; should I stop this?

“Yes,” Oliver said at the same time Felicity and Luke both said ‘no’.

We’re good. Felicity said quietly. As for the voicemail thing, I already knew you erased them.

Really? You never said anything to Ollie, though.

Look, what you did wasn’t right but I can kind of understand why you did it. That doesn’t mean it wasn’t shitty and childish, just that I get it. Oliver, however, should have known something was up. He went weeks without even speaking to me even though he should have because we were supposed to be partners. Even if we weren’t really friends, even if I was just another tool in his arsenal, he should have made the effort. He didn’t even try to reach out and that’s not on you, that’s on him.

Burn, Question muttered.

“Mute it!” Oliver snapped.

“He’s right, Batwing, shut it down,” Dick said quietly. “We don’t need to hear this stuff.”

No, no I think we all should hear this, the other man said stubbornly. Unless, of course, you aren’t man enough to hear the truth?

Do you guys want me to go? Question asked.

Stay, Laurel told her. Unless, of course, you’re uncomfortable because we can stop?

Are you uncomfortable with the truth, Arrow? Luke challenged.

“No,” Oliver growled, vowing to knock the other man on his ass the first chance he got.

“You heard them,” Dick sighed.

No, the other woman asked in a slightly high pitched voice. I’ll just…sit here and let you guys talk it out.

Thanks. She paused, He was your friend, Felicity. In fact, you guys were more than friends and that’s what killed me. I couldn’t compete with what you two had together; I didn’t even know how.
Oliver closed his eyes and swallowed painfully.

//You didn’t have to. Nothing ever happened between us while you guys were together.//

//Maybe not physically, but he was in love with you and it was obvious you had a thing for him back. The worst part was that everybody knew it, including you guys, but you never did anything about it so it was this *thing* hanging over our heads all the time. I used to almost wish you guys would hook up because as long as you were this untouchable paragon of all things pure and wonderful, I would always come up short. Sorry, I know that sounds kind of bitter, but I--//

//Sounds to me like this sort of thing you’ve got going on with Baby is sort of your MO.//

“What I feel for your sister has nothing to do with what I had with Laurel,” he said tightly.

//Are you sure? Because they seem to think it does.//

Was he sure?

Oliver screwed the vent back into place angrily, “If we’re done here then we should head out.”

Dick nodded and visually swept the room before climbing out the window and releasing another grappling line.

Luke wasn’t muting Question’s earbud so he was forced to hear them as he climbed out of the hotel window and launched his own line.

//Like I said, I get it.// Felicity said quietly and he could almost picture her soft smile as she spoke.

God, she sounded so tired. Just hearing her he could tell that she hadn’t slept in days.

//It just—I don’t know; I guess that is pretty crazy, huh? Oliver had a way of making me nuts.//

//If it’s of any comfort, he made everyone feel nuts sometimes, and when he wasn’t driving us crazy, he was pissing us off.//

That’s true, he admitted silently.

//I noticed that you said you guys didn’t hook up when we were together; how about after?//

Oliver swung up to the rooftop and stopped, waiting to hear what Felicity had to say despite his protests to the contrary.

//We had one night together right before I came to Gotham. Literally, the night before I left.//

//I don’t get it; you guys were like some kind of larger-than-life romance in the making so what happened? Not that I’m criticizing you for leaving or anything. I mean, I’m not judging you or telling you that I think you were wrong in any way…//

“Look, this is getting way too personal,” Dick said in a hard tone. “Shut it down. Question--!”

//No way.// Luke said obstinately. //I know how this story ends and he needs to hear it. He came to Gotham to drag her back, well he needs to hear why she left in the first place.//

//No, look, I get it. I hear what you’re saying now and I also heard what you said earlier, but you’re wrong; we weren’t a love story and I’m not the hero you think I am. I didn’t leave Oliver, he threw me out. We had one night and I thought he might love me; I was…God, I was in love with him, but
he didn’t want me, so I left. No, ‘left’ isn’t right; I was exiled. He told me I was no longer welcome in Starling, that if I even tried to come back I would be walled out, and that he could not and would not allow himself to have a relationship with me. I even tried calling him a few times to see if he’d change his mind, at least let me back on the team, but he didn’t; he wouldn’t. The truth is that if Oliver had told me he wanted me back, if he had said ‘stay’, I would have stayed. Even if it meant going back to being invisible, I probably would have been happy just existing in the shadows."

Oliver stood in the snow and hung his head in shame as he heard her words. On one hand, he had hurt her but, on the other, she had said the words he wanted her to say, that she would have picked him if he asked.

He wasn’t going to mess this up a second time, he decided.

"You might have enabled him but you weren’t alone in that. I spent years letting him make me feel like I was important when he needed me and invisible when he didn’t. He loved you, Laurel, not me; it was never going to be me, I was just the designated bait."

"Designated bait," Luke bit out angrily. "Hear that? Because of you, my sister thinks her only value to your team is as the ‘designated bait’.

“That’s not how it was,” Oliver growled as he began to jog across the rooftops toward the Wayne Foundation. He needed to get to Felicity and explain…

"You keep telling yourself that I beat you somehow, like this was a competition between us, but it wasn’t. There was never a you against me here; I’m not the competition and I’m no hero. Tell you the truth, when you think about it you and I are more alike than you think; you just happened to get there first and I just happened to get out a little sooner. That doesn’t mean either of us won, it just means that now we can compare scars."

"You need to leave my sister the fuck alone!" Luke told him harshly. "You and Bruce both!"

“That’s not happening,” Oliver spat out as he swung across the gap between the two buildings, his eyes seeking out the tallest one in the far distance.

"Yes, it is!"

“You want to go toe to toe with me, bring it!” He said as his legs swallowed the miles between him and his target effortlessly. “Felicity is coming home with me where she belongs; if you want to try to stop me then that’s your prerogative but I won’t fall for a sucker punch a second time.”

"Trust me, asshole; when I come at you, you’ll know it!"

“Should have fucking stayed in Bludhaven,” Dick muttered beside him as they ran together.

"Um, not to interrupt this epic sisterhood bonding thing you guys are doing because, hey, lovin’ the vibe, but who’s Oliver?"


“You’re about to find out personally, because I’m on my way,” Oliver promised him, his own anger taking hold.

“Great, you guys beat each other to a pulp; meanwhile I’m going to use all my teeth to eat my dinner, thanks,” Dick told them. “Now shut it down, Luke.”
//Sorry.//

//Me, too; sorry about that but to answer your question, apparently he’s our mutual ex-boyfriend. Why I still try to wear mascara these days is beyond me.//

//Not gonna happen; Player here, needs to hear how he broke my baby sister’s heart along with this other girl’s! Don’t worry though, when I put that tattoo of my fist on your skull it can count for both of them!//

“Believe me, I know my sins better than anyone and I’m still here fighting for Felicity,” he told him. “If you want to still take me on then be my guest!”

//Oh, I’m coming for you; you best bet on that, punk!//

//No, I mean, he wouldn’t happen to be a mask, would he? Um, say, the Arrow?//

//Yeah, as a matter of fact…How’d you guess?//

//Um yeah,// They heard just before the coms shut off.

“Finally,” Dick said. “We’re almost there. We’ll take the roof access shaft down into the alternate cave.” He held out his hand to Oliver, “It’d be easier to share a line for this last one.”

“I’m not going to the cave,” Oliver told him, shooting his line straight across to where he could see the lights and the faint outlines of the women through the windows.

As he rappelled across the expanse and scaled the building to the rooftop garden, Luke growled, //Meet you upstairs, motherfucker.//

“Shit,” Dick breathed, shooting his own line so he could join them.
Chapter Fifty-One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter Fifty-One

“Who else is coming over?” Laurel asked with a frown.


“Yup,” Renee said tightlipped, “On both counts.”

“Wait; your brother is a Bat friendly? As in Batman?” Laurel asked in surprise, then grimaced, “What am I saying; of course you know Batman, you’re like vigilante catnip.”

“Vigilante catnip?” Renee repeated slowly.

“I am not!” She scoffed.

“Okay, Barry, Oliver, Daniel–,” the other woman began.

“Daniel doesn’t count,” Felicity reminded her. “Besides, all of those other masks were in my orbit because of Oliver so he’s the catnip, not me.”

“Daniel was an asshole for using you like that but he counts,” Laurel argued, “and since when does Oliver know Batman?”

“Um…”

“She’s got you there,” Renee mumbled.

“How do you know?” Felicity asked her.

“I’m just assuming that since Nightwing, Batwing, and The Gentleman told me to tail you…”

“Who?” Laurel asked in confusion.

“Wait, who’s The Gentleman?” Felicity asked then, at Renee’s pointed look, she nodded, “Oh, Alfred? Why do you call him ‘The Gentleman’; I mean, he is but…”

“Well, no one ever told me his codename so that’s just what I always called him in my head,” she shrugged.

“Actually, his codename when he was with the British SIS was ‘Beagle’ but you’re right,” she said wrinkling her nose, “The Gentleman suits him better than that or his official Bat codename.”

“What’s his Bat codename?” Renee asked curiously.

“Penny-One,” she told her.

“That sucks,” she said with a snort.

“I know,” she said with a disgruntled note. “It could have been worse though; they could have stuck him with ‘Bat Butler’ or something.”
“Who are all these people?” Laurel said, looking between them.

“She doesn’t know?” Renee said, pointing toward her in surprise.

“No, not yet.”

“Well, then, mind filling me in?” The other woman said leadingly.

“Okay, well…” Felicity cleared her throat, “First off, you should know that Felicity Smoak isn’t my real name. Well, it is…sort of,” she shook her head. “I mean, it’s my name but my whole name is Felicity Smoak-Fox.”

Laurel looked at her askance, “Okay.”

She took a centering breath, “Long story short, I went by my mom’s maiden name for work but my dad is Lucius Fox and I have a brother and a sister, Luke and Tam,” she explained. “Luke, my brother, works with the Batman and his codename is Batwing.”

“Your brother is a mask?” She said incredulously then frowned, “Wait, I’ve never heard of a mask called ‘Batwing’.”

“You ain’t alone, sweetheart,” Question told her. “The first time Bats introduced me I thought he was talking about some kind of new Bat gadget or a hang glider or something.”

“You too?” Felicity asked before shrugging it off, “Anyway, yeah, he’s basically Batman’s counterpart in Africa but he’s back in Gotham visiting at the moment. Oh, and he and Sara are… together. Like *together* together.”

“Sara does have a way of making new friends, doesn’t she?” The other woman said with a sigh.

“Who’s Sara?” Renee asked.

“My sister,” Laurel told her. “She also goes by the handle ‘Black Canary’.”

“The Canary is your sister? Wow, you guys just keep getting hotter and hotter. What’s your handle?” She asked, “I assume from the way you guys handled yourselves back there that you’re masks, too, right?”

“Kind of,” Felicity admitted reluctantly. “Laurel’s actually more of a mask than I am though; I’m more of an administrator or tech support.”

“Right,” Renee said with a snort before turning to Laurel, “She’s full of shit, isn’t she?”

“No, she really is a mission tech but what she isn’t telling you is that while the masks are out kicking bad guy ass, she sits behind a monitor kicking theirs,” she said dryly.

Renee’s eyes glinted with amusement, “Okay, so give with the handles, already.”

“I went by Canary for a couple of months to cover for my sister but my regular handle is Manhunter,” she told her. “And Felicity goes by Starling.”

“Starling?” Renee repeated. “That sounds absolutely terrifying.” As Felicity flushed she grinned, “No, really; have you ever seen those things swarm? It’s creepy as hell, seriously.”

“Like Canary is scary?” She shot back.
“It is when the chick with the handle used to be the consort of the Heir to the Demon and is probably one of the deadliest women in the world,” she said easily.

“You know Sara?” Laurel asked curiously.

“Not personally,” Renee told her. “I did however train in Nanda Parbat with one of the guys who taught her and, from what he told me, she left quite an impression.”

“You were League?” Felicity asked in surprise.

“Me? No,” she said quickly. “Vic— Vic Sage, that was the name of the guy who was the Question before I took over, sent me to train with a guy named Richard Dragon there. Technically, he wasn’t League either but they allowed him to live and train students there because he’s the best at what he does and he never picks sides. If he thinks you’re a worthy student, he’ll teach you no matter what.”

“Yeah, Barbara said he trained her after she lost her legs,” Felicity said, brow furrowed, “I didn’t know they had the same teacher or that she went to Nanda Parbat for it though.”

“I don’t know where he trained her,” she admitted. “Dragon has dojos all over the world so there’s no telling. He’s also trained a lot of people including Bats and Nightwing so it doesn’t surprise me that there’s a connection there. He’s kind of the Kevin Bacon of the vigilante world; seven degrees of separation and all that. I went to train in Nanda Parbat because Vic was dying of lung cancer and we were hoping…at least I was hoping…” she grimaced.

“The Lazarus Pits,” Felicity finished for her.

She nodded and Laurel looked at both of them in confusion, “What’s a ‘Lazarus Pit’?”

“It’s some kind of smelly pool of magic water that can supposedly heal any injury and even bring back the dead,” she shrugged, “I don’t know much about it really but, by that point, Vic was so sick I was willing to try anything,” Renee told her with a sad half-smile. “I wanted Vic to ask the League to help him but he refused. He said he had done it to himself, that his cancer was payback for living a self-destructive lifestyle, and told me not to let my drinking destroy me like his obsessions and cigarettes destroyed him.” She took a deep breath, “He died and I buried him there.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Felicity said quietly.

“Me, too,” Laurel told her.

“It’s okay,” she shrugged. “Vic was…unique. He was a pain in the ass and half out of his mind, but he could be funny as hell and had a spiritual side to boot. He and Dragon were really into the mystical side of martial arts and he used to claim that death doesn’t necessarily last forever. In fact, after he died Dragon was absolutely convinced that the Question would be back eventually, only this time with the answers.” She grinned crookedly, “I’m not much for religion seeing as I spent most of my life in the church only to have it and my entire family turn their backs on me when I was forced out of the closet, but sometimes it feels like he’s out there watching, you know?” She cleared her throat, “So Starling, huh? The blood-curdling scourge of masks and freshly washed cars everywhere.”

“It’s…” Knowing Renee was deflecting, Felicity went ahead and let the subject drop, “Look, I had to come up with something and her sister was talking to me about birds and starlings so I just went with it.”

“When isn’t Sara talking about birds?” Laurel shot back, easily picking up on the shift in subject. “I mean, other than when she isn’t talking about sex or blowing things up?”
“You…might have a point,” she admitted reluctantly.

“You’re just lucky you wound up with Starling. She went from pretty songbirds to owls for a while there,” she told her. “You could have been stuck with ‘The Owl’, or worse, ‘Hooter’s Girl’.”

Renee snickered, “Hooter’s Girl! I could go for some hot wings now that I think about it!”

“Damn, those do sound good,” she eyed the phone for a second before turning back to them, “I’m telling you, sharing a room with Sara while we were growing up was a total nightmare. My side was filled with posters of boy bands and movie stars; hers was covered in birds. At one point, she had like twelve parakeets and two canaries in a huge cage that took up half the room.” Her eyes narrowed slightly, “I hated those things so much; they would tweet and chirp and flap their little wings constantly! Even with the sheet over the cage they would go All. Night. Long. There were days that I was this close to leaving the window open or getting some cats and tossing them in there with them, I swear to God!” She grimaced, “I was so grateful when she hit puberty and became an indiscriminate hormone factory. Compared to that, the sounds of screaming orgasms and bouncing bedsprings were much easier to deal with, let me tell you.”

“I haven’t met this Sara yet but I really, really like her,” Renee said turning to Felicity with a smirk.

“She’s a…hoot,” she offered awkwardly causing the other woman’s grin to widen.

“Funny.” Laurel paused, “Lucius Fox…” She looked around the kitchen, realization finally dawning on her, “The CEO of Wayne Enterprises is your dad?” She nodded, “So that makes you….?” She drew it out with a frown.

“Black?” Renee suggested and both women threw her a look.

“I was going to say ‘rich’,” Laurel said wryly. She turned to Felicity, “So why were you working as Ollie’s secretary all this time if you were a billionaire yourself?”

“Executive assistant,” she corrected automatically.

“You’re a billionaire?” Renee said in surprise. “Damn, glad I called dibs on the blonde.”

“What?” Felicity said before sighing, “I’m not a billionaire; my dad is but I’m not. I’m not poor; I mean, I have a pretty nice nest egg set aside of my own and I made a good salary, but I never took any money from my dad after college and, even though I have a trust fund, I can’t access it until I’m thirty-five.”

“Blind trust,” Laurel guessed, “That’s why you were able to get away with working at QC.”

“Yep.”

“What’s a ‘blind trust’ and what does it have to do with anything? Also, why do you have to be thirty-five; I thought all you rich kids lived off your trust funds?” Renee frowned.

Laurel gave her a half-smile, “Blind trusts are generally used to avoid legal complications like conflict of interest. The trustees have no direct contact with the management of their stocks or funds and can’t even know how much they’re worth. Felicity could be worth millions or twenty bucks; legally she’s not allowed to know until after she breaks her trust.”

“That sounds stupid,” she frowned. “If it’s her money, then why can’t she know how much she has?”
“Lots of reasons,” Laurel told her, “In this case, I’m assuming that since Felicity’s father is the CEO of Wayne, the majority of the stocks in her trust are probably connected to his company. Since Wayne Enterprises is so diversified it would be nearly impossible for her to find work in her particular field with any company that wasn’t in direct competition with them, so the only way she could avoid conflict of interest would be to place those stocks in a blind trust and appoint a fiduciary, or person who has the power to make financial decisions related to the management of those funds on her behalf.”

“You’re a lawyer, aren’t you?” Renee asked.

“Yep,” Laurel smirked. “How’d you guess?”

“Former cop; I can smell lawyers a mile away…although you smell pretty good, truth be told,” she said with a wink then looked from one woman to the other. “Damn,” she sighed, “even though the night started off kind of crappy, things are really starting to look up for me. I started off at my regular girl bar surrounded by the same barflies and random hookups that I seem to run into at every other pick up place in the city, and ended the night with a hot blonde and a smart brunette, both of whom can kick muchos mas ass. I gotta say, I’m a very happy girl right now.”

“Thanks!” She said brightly.

Renee grinned at her before remarking, “I don’t know though, that blind trust deal still seems kind of hinky to me. Maybe it’s because the closest thing I’ve ever had to an investment is my pension and 401-k, but just the idea of having to trust someone else with your money like that seems risky.”

“I know it seems weird when you think of it but, first off, my dad is my fiduciary so I trust him obviously, plus I wanted to make a life for myself outside of Wayne Enterprises,” Felicity said.

“Why hide your name though?” Laurel asked.

“I wanted to show I could succeed on my own which is why I used my mom’s name and not my dad’s. If people knew my name was Fox they’d either slam the door in my face professionally or use me to get to my dad.”

She frowned, “Yeah, but why not tell the team?”

Felicity took a deep breath, “Same reason, I guess. I mean, I wasn’t worried about them using me to get to Lucius but as long as I was just an IT expert…”

“I get it,” Laurel told her.

“I don’t,” Renee said.

Felicity offered her a wry grimace, “The one percent is a very small community and, if you’re a vigilante on a mission, you want to keep your ‘real’ life as separate from your night job as possible. Had the Arrow known who I was, he would have seen associating with me as being too big of a risk. People would notice if Lucius Fox’s daughter started spending her nights running around town with a guy who shoots arrows at people but no one gives a crap about what Felicity Smoak does in her spare time. However, that said,” she turned to Laurel, “if they asked I wouldn’t have lied. I told your sister and your dad about my family because they asked and had Oliver or anyone else on the team asked I would have told them the same thing.”

“Ollie never asked about your family?” Laurel said dryly. Felicity shook her head and she offered her a crooked grin, “Sounds about right.”
“So Starling is your handle, Felicity Smoak-Fox is your secret identity, and Felicity Smoak is your alias,” Renee interjected.

“I guess if you wanted to put it like that then, yeah,” she chuckled.

“So how do you know the Batman and how did your brother get involved in all of this?” Laurel asked.

Felicity blew out a harsh breath and spent all of two seconds debating it before answering, “I sort of worked for him before joining Team Arrow.”

“You were Batman’s IT Girl?” Laurel said slowly.

“Kind of.”

“And Ollie never knew?”

“Not until a few weeks ago.”

“Wow,” Laurel said with an impressed grin then paused again, “You said your brother is downstairs? Like in the Batman’s Lair?”

“Lair,” Renee snorted, “That’s so cute!”

“Why is Batman’s Lair under Bruce Wayne’s penthouse?”

Felicity looked at her, “Think about it.”

Laurel’s face stilled, “Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Bingo!” Renee said roundly.


“I don’t know,” she shrugged, “Because polo and golf are boring and the Hamptons are overrated?”

“The Arrow is a billionaire, too?” Renee asked.

“Think about it,” she scowled at her, repeating what she had said to Laurel.

“I am thinking about it and I still don’t get it,” she told her.

“Oliver Queen,” Felicity supplied.

Renee just looked at her, “Still drawing a blank.”

“Queen Consolidated’s Oliver Queen,” Laurel added.

“Nope,” she said with a shrug and an easygoing smile.

Felicity and Laurel looked at each other.

“Well, that’s refreshing,” Laurel said at last.

She nodded slowly, “We finally met a female mask who hasn’t slept with Oliver.”
“Yeah, I don’t do dick,” Renee told them, wrinkling her nose. “Just never had the urge, you know? I mean, men are okay if you’re into that sort of thing but I’m a Gold Star Girl all the way.”

“Well, Oliver definitely counts as a dick,” Laurel muttered.

“So you’ve never heard of Oliver or Queen’s Consolidated?” Felicity asked the other woman.

“Not really, no,” she told her. “I was a cop so I was a little too busy dealing with scumbags to worry about what the rich and famous get up to. I mean, other than Bruce but he’s pretty much impossible to avoid; believe me, I’ve tried.”

“Trust me, if you were a cop, you’d remember Ollie,” Laurel told her. “For a while there every cop in the country hated him. His parents had to get him a driver because every time he’d get behind the wheel they’d find a reason to give him a ticket.”

Renee shot them a curious look. “Why, what’d he do? I mean, other than shoot arrows at people and dress up like a hip hop version of Robin Hood? By the way,” she said looking from one woman to the other, “green leather hoodie? Doesn’t that get hot in the summer time? That guy must do all his best work downwind.”

“He…smells pretty good actually.” Laurel threw her a look and she grimaced wryly, “Well, he does. Anyway, remember the rich guy who was shipwrecked around nine years ago?” Felicity asked her.

Realization suddenly dawned on the other woman’s face. “Oh! The rich punk with the douchebag haircut who peed on a cop and didn’t even get a slap on the wrist? That little pisher became a mask? Ugh.” She curled her lips in disgust, “That kind of puts a damper on the whole ‘superhero’ gig for me. Instead of ‘Arrow’ he should’ve called himself the ‘Amazing Pee Boy’ or ‘Golden Showers Man’.”

“Is it wrong that I really enjoyed hearing that?” Laurel returned.

“Little bit,” Felicity told her.

“So why are you living in Bruce Wayne’s penthouse?” Laurel asked.

“Well…” she said, biting her lip. “Actually, Bruce and I--”

At that moment the heard a muffled ‘thunk’ outside the glass doors leading out onto the rooftop garden.

“What was that?” Laurel asked as she and Felicity both looked outside.

“That would be the dinner guests…” Renee said under her breath.

Felicity reached over for Isabel’s gun as Laurel reached inside her shoulder holster. Both women got up at the same time, not even needing to speak as they took their positions on either side of the doors.

“This should be interesting,” Renee sighed and placed her fedora back on her head as she got up as well and waited.

It was quiet, the only sounds being the faint burble of the heated infinity pool and spa outside the doors. The snow was coming down harder now. Felicity counted her breaths and adjusted her grip on the unfamiliar gun. She missed her P99 and her Glock; their grips and familiar weight gave her confidence whereas this new gun didn’t, but she couldn’t risk running into her bedroom after them. The rosewood, while textured with a diamond pattern, felt slick against her palms, reminding her of
something she didn’t need reminding of at that moment. Also she missed having ten extra shots in the clip, proof positive that Dig and Lance had been right to steer her toward the plain black police and military duty pistols rather than the more elegant looking Kimber.

Laurel looked at her and gave her a silent signal, pointing to the weapon in Felicity’s hand. Felicity held up five fingers, signaling she hadn’t reloaded yet, so Laurel reached into her boot and tossed her a backup piece; a **Sig 250 Compact**. Felicity looked to Question who had moved behind the counter and nodded so the woman flipped off the light switch with a shrug.

Darkness enveloped the kitchen broken only by the faintly glowing LED lights of the appliances and the small solar lights on the deck that illuminated the trees and the burbling pool. They watched silently as a figure scaled the clear bulletproof barrier that surrounded the roofline, his green hood appearing nearly black in the low light just as another figure in black with a blue bird emblem across his chest landed lightly beside him.

“Ollie?” Laurel said incredulously.

“Dick?” Felicity said at the same time.

She handed Laurel back her piece, but still held onto hers, as she entered the code to unlock the doors. She was just about to open them when another large figure burst into the kitchen from the opposite direction.

Without even stopping to think about it, Laurel and Felicity both turned and leveled their weapons at the intruder.

“Whoa!” Luke said, holding up his hands in surprise just as Question flipped the lights back on, a bemused look on her face. “Baby, what the hell?! Since when do you go around pointing guns at people?!”

“Luke!” Felicity growled, “Since when the hell do you come running into my kitchen like that in the middle of the night?”

“Since that asshole showed up,” he said, pointing to Oliver who was standing just outside the glass doors.

“Obviously, he’s met Ollie then,” Laurel said dryly.

“What gave it away?” Felicity asked her as she scowled at the other two figures hovering outside. “Laurel, Luke; Luke, Laurel.”

“Hi,” she said, shoving her weapon back in her shoulder holster under her jacket.

“Hi,” he said then practically growled as he stalked towards the glass doors, his muscles tight and his expression livid, “Motherfucker…!”


He stabbed the air with his finger, “Not until after I put my foot up that piece of shit’s ass for hurting you!”

“Stand down,” she told him using the voice of the handler she’d become and not the sister he knew. Luke relaxed his stance reluctantly and Felicity pinned him with a hard look, “Laurel is going to let Dick and Oliver in—” Luke opened his mouth to speak but she held up her gun, tip pointed toward the ceiling, in a silencing gesture, “You will *not* get into a brawl in my house, do you understand
“What are you going to do; shoot me?” He asked sarcastically.

“She might,” Renee drawled from behind the counter. “You wouldn’t be the first person she’s shot tonight.”

“I mean it, Luke; you break so much as a single dish and I’m throwing you off the side of the building,” she said firmly.

“That’s a little harsh,” Renee snorted.

“Are you enjoying this?” Luke asked with a dirty look.

“Actually, yes; yes I am,” the other woman admitted. “Hot chicks with guns, delivery from Aparo’s; hell, this is my idea of the perfect date. I was seconds from closing the deal with both of them when you and the rest of the sausage-fest showed up to cock-block me.”

“You weren’t that close, trust me,” Laurel shot back then holstered her weapons and opened the door to face Oliver, “Out for a stroll, Ollie?” She drawled.

“What are you doing here?” He asked her harshly. “Why the hell aren’t you back in Starling or with your mom in Central City? And why are you at Felicity’s apartment in the middle of the night?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Felicity said with an edge of irritation as she put Isabel’s gun back down on the table.

“We need to talk,” Oliver told her as he and Dick walked inside the kitchen.


“Like I said over coms; you want to go, let’s go,” Oliver said in low tones as he set his stance.

Luke stepped toward Oliver only to have Felicity step between them.

“Knock it off,” she told her brother tersely and the sky gave an ominous rumble as the wind began to pick up, blowing the snow against the windows. “You too!” She snapped at Oliver. “I don’t know what the hell is going on or why the two of you decided to drop in on me in the middle of the night but both of you just need to get your heads out of your asses and not break my apartment!” She gave them both pointed looks before closing her eyes and shaking her head, “Wait,” she looked at Renee, “was your ear bud live this whole time?”

Renee winced, “Kind of…”

Laurel snorted and Felicity rubbed the bridge of her nose wearily, “Go home Luke.”

“I’m not going anywhere!” Her brother scowled. “Not until I drop the hammer on this asshole!”

“Okay, fine,” Felicity said, stalking over to the doors leading to the outside. She passed Dick who was leaning against the wall with a longsuffering expression, “Hi Dick.”

“Hey, babe,” he said as he watched her open the door and turn to the other two men.

“Both of you; outside, now,” she said angrily.

“Excuse me?” Oliver said, pulling back his hood.
“You heard me,” she turned toward him. “I don’t know why you’re here but I’ll be damned if I let you wreck another place so you,” she turned to her brother who was firmly planted in the center of the kitchen, “and you are going to take your pissing contest outside where you can beat each other to a bloody pulp because this,” she swept her hand through the air, “is my dream kitchen and no one is messing this up for me; not after the day I’ve had! No way!”

“I’m not leaving,” Oliver told her in a harsh voice.


“I’m just here for the food,” Dick shrugged.

“Really?” She said witheringly.

“Bruce called me in during a breakfast meeting because you were apparently in mortal danger so I’ve been stuck on a roof for the last eleven hours and it’s kind of hard to get delivery while doing surveillance on the top of a condemned canning factory, know what I mean?”

She tossed Dick a dirty look as Renee began to snicker.

“Enough,” Oliver ground out. “I’m here to take you back to Starling,” he glanced at Laurel, “both of you. Get your stuff and let’s go.”

She and Laurel looked at each other before she turned to Oliver, her head tilted to the side, “Really?”

“I could shoot him,” Laurel offered flatly. “Not, you know, dead, but maybe in the leg or the butt or something?”

“Tempting,” Felicity muttered.

The phone rang and Felicity shot Dick a look.

“Why don’t I just get that?” He said, lips pursed as he moved away from the door to answer it.

“Just who the hell do you think you are?” Felicity asked Oliver.

“I think I’m the person getting the two of you out of this mess you’ve apparently gotten yourselves into!” He shot back.

“We don’t need your help, we’re not damsels in distress, and we can handle this on our own!” Felicity said red-faced, “And if anyone is leaving it’s you! Go home!”

“Bullshit!” He snapped, taking a step closer, “You both nearly got yourselves killed tonight before you shot some gangbanger and ran over two others with your car!”

“So what?” She asked him.

“So what!?!” He said incredulously.
“Yeah, ‘so what’?” She repeated. “I had a situation and I handled it fine all by myself.”

He pointed a gloved hand toward the skyline that was now obscured by a thick haze of heavy snow and icy sleet, “You call what happened out there tonight ‘handling it’?”

“Yes!” She snapped, “You handle your problems by arrowing people, I shoot them and hit them with my car; what’s your point?”

“She’s got you there,” Renee said from where she was leaning against the counter.

“You could have been killed!”

“Like I haven’t almost been killed a hundred times before in Starling? Please. Besides, I’ve been on the verge of being killed all day and I’m perfectly fine!”

“That might not have been the best argument to go with,” Laurel muttered, falling back some so that she was standing closer to Renee at the counter.

“Perfectly fine?” He raged, “You’ve got cuts and bruises all over your face and you look like crap!”

“Yeah, this guy is some kind of player all right,” Renee said shaking her head. “Way to sweet talk the pants off her, Romeo.”

Oliver’s face darkened with anger as he threw the other woman a glare, before turning back to Felicity, “You’ve got bags under your eyes, you’ve obviously lost weight, and I’ll be damned if I’m leaving you here to get yourself killed just because you’re being stubborn! You’re coming home with me and that’s final!”

“By the way, that was Bruce; he said that you should call him back when…” Dick began just as the phone rang again, “I’ll just…get that. Again.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you!” Luke said, stepping forward and pushing Oliver hard in the chest.

The other man threw a punch and clocked Luke in the jaw, causing him to fall back so hard the dishes in the china cabinet rattled.

“Enough!” Felicity shouted, the sky echoing her outrage as the storm escalated.

Renee and Laurel’s heads whipped toward the windows where graupel and large fist-sized hail pellets were beginning to bounce against the rooftop while lightning curled oddly around the low snow clouds.

“Shit,” Renee breathed.

“I didn’t think it ever snowed here in the city that much,” Laurel murmured. “Upstate maybe, but in Gotham?”

“It doesn’t; well, not since 2010 when we got freak blizzard that dropped close to thirty inches,” she told her. “They said something about a lake effect over the radio but I didn’t think it was going to be this bad. Goddamn.”

“Uh, food’s here,” Dick offered.

“If you two want to beat each other to a bloody pulp then do it out there!” She snapped.
“And I told you I’m not leaving,” Oliver said in a harsh registry.

“And I promised him,” Luke stabbed his finger toward Oliver, “a depressed skull fracture!”

Dick hitched his thumb toward the foyer, “You know, seriously, security is on their way up with like a bunch of delivery guys…”

“You know what, I give up!” Felicity said, throwing up her hands. “I’m done! Kill each other, I don’t care! Wreck the whole goddamn kitchen! Burn the fucking place down!”

“Felicity--!” Oliver began only to clench his jaw when she held up a finger to silence him.

“Don’t speak to me!” She told him. She turned to her brother who was smirking nastily, “As for you, I’m telling Peggy Ann!”

The smile was instantly wiped off her brother’s face, “Baby--!”

“No!” She snapped. “Done! D-O-N-E—done!” By that time she was shaking from head to toe as rage, adrenaline, and exhaustion all battled inside of her. Another loud rumble of thunder trailed across the sky as she took a centering breath, “How many rooms did Tam get to, do you know?”

Her brother scowled poutily, his arms folded across his chest, “All of the rooms have beds and linens and she’s supposed to bring more furniture tomorrow.”

“Fine,” she said, turning to Renee and Dick, “You guys might as well spend the night. Renee, I’m sure Dick has something you can wear to bed and we’ll figure something out in the morning. I need you, Laurel, and Luke to help with the food while Dick and Oliver stay out of sight as they’re still in their suits.” She turned to Laurel, “If they break anything, you and Renee can shoot them and toss the bodies off the building. Just don’t get anything on the carpets.”

“Okay,” she told her blithely.

“Sure,” Renee echoed in the same tone. “My grandma had a blue willow collection; I totally get it.”

“Damn it, Felicity!” Oliver growled.

“Shut. Up.” She said with a dangerous look. She turned to Dick, “You guys figure out the rest of it. I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

“You’re not going to eat?” Laurel asked with a frown.

“I lost my appetite,” she bit out.

“More for me,” Laurel shrugged as she, Luke, and Renee followed her out of the kitchen and toward the foyer.

“We need to talk,” Oliver said tersely, following her as she stalked out of the kitchen.

“We really, really don’t,” she told him as she marched at a brisk pace towards her bedroom.

“Hey!” Luke called out as he attempted to go after him but Renee headed him off just as the door buzzed.

“Food first then you can pound pee boy all you want,” she told him.

“It’s a long story,” Laurel said as she herded both of them towards the food.

Oliver followed Felicity to her bedroom. Just as she reached for the doorknob he wrapped his fingers around her arm and pulled her back, “We need to talk!”

Felicity rounded on him, “Why are you here?”

“Why the hell do you think?”

“I don’t know, Oliver,” she said. “You told me in no uncertain terms that we couldn’t be together, that I should move on. You told me I could never set foot back in Starling again and now you’re here. You show up at my place in the middle of the night so you can get into a fist fight with my— MMPH!” Oliver gripped her tight and pulled her into a hard kiss. She immediately shoved hard at his chest, reared her hand back, and slapped the ever living shit out of him.

Oliver’s eyes registered his surprise before hardening once more, his hands still clutching her to his chest, “You’re coming home with me.”

“No,” she said in a snarl.

“Yes!” He bit out.

“Why would I do that, Oliver?” She asked angrily.

“Because you’re in love with me, that why!” He shot back.

“So?”

He faltered then added, “And I’m in love with you.”

“And?”

“And…” He fell back slightly, his eyebrows drawing together in confusion, “What do you mean, ‘and’? You love me, damn it! You can’t marry Wayne if you’re in love with me!”

“Why not?” She threw back. “You’re not the only person I’m in love with at the moment, you know; a concept you yourself should be familiar with by now! The difference is that when I make a commitment, I stick to it! I don’t run away or throw people out of my life because I’m scared then reel them back in because someone else offers them the life I wasn’t willing to!” She watched as Oliver shifted his weight slightly and narrowed his eyes in a mixture of anger and frustration, “You know what? Forget it; I’m tired and I’m going to bed.” She put her hand on the door and he crowded her signaling his intention to follow her inside. She pushed at his chest, “Alone!”

He caught her wrist, his eyes dark and intense, “I love you and you’re in love with me, Felicity. You still belong to me and I’m not leaving until you’re ready to come home. Even if that means staying right here in Gotham until I can prove that to you once and for all.”

“Goodnight, Oliver,” she told him as she snatched her wrist back, went inside her room, then slammed the door behind her. She closed her eyes and breathed, willing her heart to slow down before reaching inside her pocket for her phone that was vibrating.

It was a text from Bruce.

//Call me ASAP.//

She walked over to the bed and fell on it bonelessly before hitting redial.
“Hey,” she said quietly as soon as he picked up.

“Are you alright?” He asked her. “What happened at Orbital?”

“Stuff.” She rubbed her hand over her eyes and breathed in sharply, “Um…when are you coming over? You are coming, right?”

“Did something happen? Are you okay?”

“I’m…I’m just tired,” she told him. “Are you on your way over or are you staying at the manor tonight? I could try to get to you instead? The snow’s coming down pretty hard but they’ve already got trucks out. I saw them on my way home…”

“I’m not in Gotham, I’m in DC,” he said after a brief pause. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

She ignored the question, “Are you there because of the Lois Lane thing? Have you found out anything yet?”

“Not yet,” he told her. “Now answer me; are you alright?”

“I’m always alright,” she joked weakly.

“Believe it or not that’s a pop culture reference I do get, so even if I couldn’t hear the strain in your voice right now, I’d know something was wrong,” he bit out. “What happened? Did you get hurt? Was it the Rochev woman? Put Dick back on the phone.”

“I’m fine!”

“Baby--!”

“No, honestly, I’m fine,” she lied. “It’s just been a really long day and…” She sniffled slightly and drew her knees up to her chest, “I just, I was kind of looking forward to you being here.”

“Baby, what happened?” He asked her. “And don’t say ‘nothing’ because I know when you’re lying.” He paused again, “Is it Queen?” He growled. “Is he there? Goddamn it, I should have--!”

“Yes, he’s here but so is Dick, Luke, Laurel, and Renee,” she interrupted.

“Laurel Lance?”

“Yeah, I invited her to stay over because I was worried that Orbital might have bugged her hotel and I thought it would be safer if we stuck together.”

“Queen said she attacked you back in Starling before she went to rehab.”

“Verbally,” she emphasized, “and that was months ago. Plus she was high off her ass on pills and booze but she’s better now.”

“Baby, she’s mentally ill and prone to violent outbursts; I don’t want her staying with you when I’m not there, not until I have a chance to assess the situation for myself.”

“She’s not mentally ill,” she told him. “Well, okay, she is but she’s not crazy or violent. She has a chemical imbalance that is being treated with medication and she voluntarily committed herself to a mental health facility as a result. She’s good, I trust her, and I don’t need you to assess anything for me. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Besides, it’s the middle of the night and it’s snowing; I’m not turning anyone out in that.”
“Fine,” he grumbled unhappily, “but what are the rest of them doing over there at this time of the
night and who the hell is ‘Renee’?” He demanded, “Wait, do you mean Renee Montoya? Why did
Dick have to call in the Question?” He muttered a curse, “What the hell happened tonight?”

“I met Renee at a gay bar and we hit it off; as for the rest of it…” she rubbed her temples wearily, “I
don’t want to talk about it,” she told him as she curled sideways onto his pillow and tugged it close.

“You met Renee…at a gay bar.”

“Dinner and dancing with Isabel, remember?”

“I haven’t forgotten,” he said grimly. “What else happened?”

“Just…stuff.”

She could practically hear him grinding his teeth, “What kind of ‘stuff’?”

“I…might have run into a few gang members on my way home. No big deal.”

“Are you hurt? Why the hell didn’t Dick call me--?! Goddamn it!”

“I’m not hurt, calm down,” she said grumpily.

“Are you sure? Because, damn it Felicity, if you’re lying to me--!”

“I’m fine, Bruce,” she said allowing a hint of annoyance to creep into her tone. “I’m just tired, it’s
been a really stressful day, and I was looking forward to cuddling up and going to sleep with my not
exactly a fiancé, okay? That’s all.”

She could practically hear him exhale and he muttered an apology, “I know, Baby; I miss you, too.” She heard the
bed shift underneath him as his voice softened slightly, “Believe me, leaving town was the last thing
I wanted to do right now. I tried to call you but you were out of range.”

“It’s okay. At least now you can get some of the answers we need,” she told him. “Oh, and I talked
to Miranda tonight and confronted her about the whole HIVE thing.”

“You did what?” She could hear the Bat creep into his tone, “Do you know how dangerous that
was? What if she--?”

“It was over a video chat; I was perfectly safe. Besides, it wasn’t that heated of a confrontation,” she
told him. “I told her that she either needed to tell me what was going on or I was going to quit and
she promised to tell me everything after the mission tomorrow.”

“What about Rochev?”

She yawned, “Um, she’s supposed to be heading out of town tomorrow so Miranda is on her way,
unless of course this weather shuts down the airports. When are you coming home because, even
though this probably sounds needy as hell, I really wish you were here right now?”

“I don’t know,” he said softly. “We have the breakfast meeting in the morning followed by the
hospital press conference, then we’re heading to Metropolis to meet with the lawyers. If everything
works out then I should be back by Thursday afternoon at the latest.”

“Oh. Okay,” she said, unable to keep the disappointment out of her voice as her eyelids tugged
closed.
“Baby, if you need me there—”

“No,” she said quickly, “You need to poke around and figure out what’s going on down there. I can handle everything up here; I’ll be fine.”

“Fine, huh?” He said skeptically. “You still haven’t expanded on that ‘gang member’ thing and as soon as you hang up I’m calling Dick, you know that right?”

“What; you don’t trust me?” She asked him dryly.

Silence.

“Fine,” she muttered, “I may have gotten slightly carjacked tonight.”

“What?!” He thundered.

“I wasn’t hurt,” she told him. “They were, I wasn’t. Of course, I still have to return the car to the leasing company tomorrow which should be fun. I owned it for all of twenty minutes and now it’s full of bullet holes,” she muttered. “I really liked that car, too.”

“Bullet holes?” He growled.

She sighed, “Yep. If Isabel’s insurance doesn’t cover it, expect a big charge on your card tomorrow.”

“They tried to shoot you? How many were there and where the hell were Dick and Queen when this was going down?”

“Only three,” she said offhandedly. “I was dropping Laurel off to get her stuff and they confronted me in the parking lot of the Burnley.”

“Nightwing and Queen were supposed to have eyes on you!”

“Well, they showed up eventually but, like I said, I handled it before they got there,” she said with another yawn.

“And how exactly did you ‘handle it’?” He ground out.

“I ran down two of them with the car and shot the other one twice in the shoulder.”

“Goddamn it, where the hell did you get a gun?!”

“Um, I have like plenty of guns, all legally registered, but, for the record, I didn’t use one of mine; the gun I used was Isabel’s,” she told him. “And, before you ask, I stumbled over it in the car; she left it behind when she gave it to me. The car not the gun; I still have to return it to her...the gun, I mean. The car goes back to the leasing company and, chances are, there will be a few penalties attached because bullet holes might actually be harder to explain than blood stains in the backseat.”

“I’m coming home!” He told her. “Tonight! Let Dick know that I’ll be there in a couple of hours!”

“Bruce, don’t be ridiculous,” she told him. “Besides, it’s a blizzard out there; there’s no way you can get a plane to land until the weather clears.”

“I can find a way!”

“I told you, I’m perfectly fine.”
“As soon as the weather clears I’m coming home—period!” He told her. “And those bloodstains in the backseat better not be yours or I---! I’m calling Dick!”

“No, the bloodstains were in my car back in Starling and that was, like, three years and a trade-in ago,” she told him. “Plus, it was Oliver’s blood, not mine. His mother shot him so he crawled into my backseat.”

“Yeah, well, I get the impulse.”

“You’re being silly, you know that right?” She said dryly.

“No, I’m not. And you’re not returning that car,” he told her. “If it’s been shot up then they’ll call the police and you could be linked to what happened. Have Alfred give you a car out of the garage or buy you whatever you want, then he’ll get a replacement vehicle and change over all the VIN markers.”

“I can handle explaining away a few measly bullet holes,” she said dryly. “When I turned in my Mini the first time, I just cried and told the guy at the car dealership that my dog was hit by a car in order to get out of paying for it. It worked, too; he even threw in seat covers and all-weather floor mats then offered to talk his sister into giving me a puppy when her dog had her next litter.”

“I am not in the mood to joke about this,” he said angrily. “Someone tried to kill you tonight!”

“Someone tries to kill me practically every other day whether you’re here or not so you might as well stay put.”

“Was that meant to reassure me, because it didn’t,” he told her flatly.

“We lead dangerous lives, Bruce,” she sighed wearily. “If you’re serious about getting married and creating a life together then you have to face the fact that neither of us is in a low-risk profession here. Besides, they weren’t trying to kill me; they wanted my car and my purse. It’s Gotham and this city is what it is. I wasn’t even in the East End, I was in the Financial District, so it could have happened to anyone. Luckily, they picked the wrong girl to mess with and I could handle myself.”

“‘Luckily,’” he spat out. “You call that ‘luck’?”

“Better me than some innocent civilian,” she said reasonably. “I may not be an operator in the strictest sense but I’m still a vigilante, Bruce.”

“After this Stellmoor business is over, you and I are going to have a sit down where we will be discussing that at length,” he warned her. “If I’m quitting then you are, too. I’m done; we’re done, understood?”

“No,” she snorted.

“Yes!”

“Bruce…”

“No,” he said firmly. “You’re my wife, Felicity, or you will be soon enough! After this we’re both taking a step back. Besides, you and I are going to be far too busy to deal with anything else but the wedding now that your dad knows about us.”

“What?” She sat straight up in bed, “Did Luke--?”
“No,” he told her. “I talked to your dad a little while ago and told him everything.”

“I told you not to tell him yet,” she scowled.

“I explained that we weren’t ready to go public until after this Miller thing is settled and we finish with the Stellmoor investigation,” he told her. “I didn’t want Lucius finding out about this from Luke or put it off any longer than necessary.”

“But--!”

“I don’t see the issue here,” he said, “This morning I was prepared to tell him everything anyway.”

“But that was before the Orbital thing and the Miller Inquiry! What if Isabel finds out?” She demanded. “If dad knows then he’ll tell Mama T and Peggy then everyone will know; this could completely blow my cover.”

“I don’t give a damn about Isabel Rochev and, frankly…” he paused, “I’m going ahead and pulling you out of this op before you get hurt.”

She ran her hand through her already mussed hair, “We already discussed this.”

“Well, it’s my call and it’s not up for debate,” he said forcefully. “I don’t want you going back inside there and now that your dad knows, it’s far too big of a risk. He’s already planning on meeting with the head of PR and discussing a media strategy. You and I are going to be doing interviews and photo ops for the next six months which means that we’re going to have to be very careful from here on out. One wrong move could expose both of us so neither of us will be going back out into the field once I get back to Gotham. I’ll stay in the background helping with the investigation while Dick and Luke act as field support; we’re done, understood?”

“Wait, why do you get to decide that and what do you mean by we’ll be doing interviews for the next six months?” She repeated.

“It’s my call because this is my team and my city. As for the press junket, your father said that six months was a more acceptable time frame than six weeks. Also, you can forget about the simple wedding,” he added ruefully, “According to Lucius there’s no way around it so we’ll be having an interfaith ceremony at First Episcopal with both a priest and a rabbi.”

She shifted against the pillows, her irritation quickly escalating to anger, “And the two of you just decided all this without me?”

“I didn’t decide anything,” he objected, “not about the wedding at any rate; that was all Lucius.” He blew out a frustrated breath, “He’s not wrong though; if we don’t do this the right way then all hell will break loose so I figured we should just go along with it. Believe me, I did tell him that you wouldn’t be happy but after I let slip that you could be pregnant--”

“Whoa, what?!” She almost shouted.

He cleared his throat, “Your father asked why we wanted to rush the wedding and basically asked if there was a reason for the press to be looking for signs of a baby bump to which I said that it was unlikely but that we agreed if you did get pregnant--”

“You told my father that we were—that I was--! What the hell?”

“Trust me; your father is well aware of the fact that babies are a consequence of sex and not the stork,” he said irritably.
“Why would you discuss our sex life with Lucius in the first place?” She demanded.

“What did you want me to tell him? That we weren’t sleeping together?”

“Yes!” She snapped, “Or, better yet, just don’t say anything at all!”

“I realize I made an error in judgment but it’s not like having sex with the woman I love and intend to marry is something I should have to hide. I’m a forty year old man, for Christ’s sake.”

“Goddamn it, Bruce,” she ranted, “Lucius is my dad!”

“So?”

“So I don’t want my dad to think about us…” she growled in frustration. “Why would you even say something like that? Just tell me that; what was the point?”

“I think you’re overreacting a little here. I’ll admit that Lucius was a bit upset about it at first but I assured him that we would be more careful and that we wouldn’t start trying for a family until after the wedding. In fact, he was pretty adamant about you not getting pregnant so I assured him that we’d do our best to make sure that didn’t happen. After the wedding though is a different story.”

“You told him that?” She said tightly.

“I had to,” he admitted easily. “There are a lot of legalities to consider and he had to be aware of all the facts. He’s hiring you your own lawyer and overseeing the pre-nup--”

“Pre-nup?” She squeaked.

“I know, I told him we didn’t need one but he insisted,” he sighed. “Also, I have to change my will to include you and any children we have so you’ll need to meet with the estate planner as well. He’s also setting up an appointment for us to meet with an insurance adjuster.”

“For what?” She said incredulously.

“Lucius wants me to get a couple of life insurance policies. I imagine it’s going to be a fairly large policy so we should both go in for the physicals and do all the genetic testing you wanted to have done then.”

“I can’t believe you’d do something this high-handed and not loop me in.” She closed her eyes and felt her cheeks burn with anger and embarrassment, “I just—you’ve known my dad your entire life; how you thought he would be okay with hearing something like that, that we’re sleeping together and that you intend to knock me up ASAP, is beyond me. Maybe in your little playboy world that kind of thing is okay but my dad gives new meaning to the word ‘conservative’. Even Tim had enough sense to try to lie to him and claim that all those nights he spent over at Tam’s condo ended in a firm handshake with him sleeping on the couch! He doesn’t *want* to know his daughters are having sex and, ridiculous or not, I’d just as soon he live in ignorant bliss for the rest of his and my life!”

He snorted derisively, “And what happens when you do get pregnant?”

“When and if that happens then I’ll change my name to ‘Mary’ and we’ll call it the immaculate conception! I am *so* angry with you right now…” she looked up at the ceiling, “I can’t believe you; I really can’t.”

“Look, I realize this wasn’t handled well, but I didn’t really have any other choice,” he said
dismissively. “Earlier when Luke and Queen confronted me I told them that we were getting married and that I was planning on talking to your father this morning before all of this Orbital business happened. Luke accused me of using you and wanted me to back off so Queen could haul you back to Starling so I told him that we were serious and that we were getting married as soon as possible. Queen made some smart ass remark and I lost my temper and told him that…” he stopped.

She furrowed her brow, “You told him that what?”

“I told him…basically, I told him the same thing I told Lucius; that we were moving in together and that, while you weren’t pregnant yet, you probably would be soon enough,” he said with unaccustomed reluctance.

“Why would you say something like that?” She asked incredulously.

“It’s the truth, isn’t it?” He challenged.

“No!” She exclaimed, “I said I wanted kids; I didn’t say I wanted kids right this minute! And why the hell would you say that to Oliver of all people?”

“Why the hell do you think?” He asked. “He needed to know that you were mine and to back the hell off!”

“You want to know what I think? I think that you’re both a couple of macho territorial idiots! All of you! You, Luke, and Oliver need to stop because I am not some kind of prize in a game of tug of war!” She growled. She rubbed her hand over her mouth, “I’m hanging up; I can’t do this with you right now.”

“Felicity--!”

“No!” She snapped, “I’m not talking about this anymore tonight. I told you not to tell Lucius and you did it anyway but, okay, fine. I get that, I could understand that, but then you make all these high-handed decisions without me, you tell me I have to retire without asking me what I want, you plan out the rest of my life without me, and then you go around telling everyone I care about to start planning the baby shower even though we decided not to have kids right away! A year, maybe two; remember? Even then we were going to discuss it, have genetic testing done, and probably adopt first! Not only that, but I never agreed to marry you in six weeks--!”

“Yes, you did!”

“No, I agreed to move in after we talked to my dad, but I never agreed to that timeline!”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anyway since your father made us agree to wait six months instead.”

She chuckled humorlessly, “I don’t think so.”

“And just what the hell do you mean by that?” He asked grimly.

“What I mean is that I can’t agree to that or any other timeline because, right now, I don’t even know if I want to still be involved with someone who could do what you did, Bruce.”

“I didn’t do anything!” He burst out.

“No, you treated me like a goddamn protocol or like I was a toy that you and Oliver were fighting over!”
“That’s a load of bullshit and you know it!” He snapped, “I’m marrying you because I love you; I’m ready to start a family with you because I want you! I don’t give a shit about Queen!”

She rubbed the heel of her hand against her forehead to relieve the tension headache that had begun to form there, “I’m hanging up; we’ll talk tomorrow but, at the moment, I’m too tired and upset to deal with this right now.”

“Fine,” he said, a hint of anger still present in his own voice.

“Fine,” she agreed. “Goodnight.”

There was a moment of silence before she heard him shift the phone against his ear, “I love you, you know that right?”

“I love you, too, Bruce, but I just can’t think straight right now and saying you love me isn’t some kind of cure-all,” she said wearily.

“I just want to keep you safe,” he told her. “I’m not trying to control you or play games; I just want to marry you so we can spend the rest of our lives together. I’m ready to have that with you.”

“I know and, like I said, I love you, too. It’s just….” she made a frustrated noise, “There’s just so much on our plates right now that I can’t deal with this until I get some sleep.”

“Okay,” he agreed softly, “Go to bed; goodnight, Baby.”

“Goodnight,” she whispered before ending the call and tossing it on the nightstand carelessly. She dragged down the covers and slipped between the sheets, not bothering with a shower or changing into a nightgown, then curled her body around the pillow that smelled like Bruce, and slept.

*\//You survive even if it means killing every son of a bitch who crosses your path, you hear me? You survive.//*

She was running through the darkness, the wind battering against her body as she tried to stay on her feet. The ground was uneven and she could barely see. The waxing crescent moon was barely visible through the thick storm clouds above her so there was no light to guide her way, but still she ran.

She’d left her glasses with Lance because the rain was obscuring them too badly and her astigmatism was fairly mild but now she wished she had kept them; not that it would have helped. At the very least they might have kept the rain out of her eyes. The stinging droplets of water burned across her cheeks like needles and she could swear they were drawing blood as they cut through the air. Her legs hurt, her chest hurt, and she’d stumbled a while back and twisted her ankle but she didn’t slow down.

Slowing down, stopping, meant death and she had to survive…at least until the charges were planted and she could get to Slade.

In the distance she could see the vague shapes of outlying buildings. She recognized the curved roof of the metal barracks that were slowly succumbing to entropy and ran toward them even though she knew she was running to her death, or worse, *theirs*; her team.

For all she knew they might already be dead; if so, then at least she’d be joining them soon enough.
She caught a flash of light as someone spotted her and heard a call go out. She dove behind the building and pressed herself hard against the metal siding as she attempted to catch her breath.

“...I thought I saw something,” she heard a voice growl over the howl of the wind. “Split up!”

The wind was whipping all around, drowning out all other sounds except the roar of her blood and the clanging of metal against metal as the wind tried to tear the metal roof off the barracks. She adjusted her grip, the blood and rain making her hands a mix of slick and sticky.

Her clothes clung to her body from rain, sweat, and gore, and every time she breathed she could smell it on her; copper-tinged death. She swallowed convulsively as she tried to get both her breathing and her gag reflex under control. She knew she was going to vomit, there was no way around it. Her mouth kept filling with saliva and she could feel her stomach begin to clench as her throat began to open but she did her best to maintain control. She couldn’t afford to be out in the open for long and the noise might attract Slade’s men.

In and out, she breathed. In through her nose, out through her mouth. She suppressed a whimper, sobbing quietly as she watched a shadow pass by but the man never turned towards her even though she could have easily brushed his sleeves with her fingertips.

As soon as he turned the corner she eased down the side of the metal building until she came to a window. The glass had long since been shattered so she put the Sig in her waistband and pulled herself up, the muscles of her abdomen protesting sharply. As soon as she hit the floor of the barrack’s interior, her stomach emptied and she began to spill its contents all over the floor. Over and over she heaved, nearly passing out from lack of oxygen, until there was nothing left. She panted heavily as she kneeled on all fours, the smell of sickness, rot, and death overwhelming her and making her head spin.

She spat a few times, wishing she had brought a canteen or a bottle of water, before picking herself up and looking around helplessly. It was so dark she couldn’t see her own hand in front of her face and hot; God, it was hot. Her hair clung to her neck and forehead and her cheeks felt like they were on fire. The heat and sick made her stomach clench again but she didn’t give into it. Instead, she stumbled forward, glass crunching under her feet as she felt her way across the room, stumbling and tripping over debris as she went.

She could hear the sound of voices outside, their voices muffled by the storm and distance but it was enough that she knew they were closing in on her. She knew she had to go, had to keep moving, that time was not on her side, but all she could think of at that moment was that she wanted to go home. Like a child, all she wanted at that moment was home.

She felt hot tears pour down her cheeks as she thought of her father, of Peggy and her brother and sister. She thought about Mama T and hoped Lance survived so they would know what happened to her. She thought about Barbara and Tam, of Tim and Dick…

…of Bruce.

And she thought about Oliver who was probably already dead or dying. Part of her wished Oliver would magically appear to save her or for Bruce to swoop down and make everything okay, but that wasn’t going to happen.

There would be no hero to save the day this time; all the heroes were gone. It was just her now.

She reached out with her foot, feeling her way across the room, arms and fingers stretched before her
until she found the wall and began to ease her way toward the door. She pulled out the Sig and fumbled clumsily for the handle but as soon as her finger touched metal the door swung open with a clatter and she was face to face with one of the mercenaries, his own pistol pointed towards her, the flashlight mounted on the barrel nearly blinding her.

There was no thought, no hesitation; she fired.

It wasn’t like in the movies or television; there wasn’t a neat little hole and a trickle of blood for effect. Death was far more grotesque than that.

She was right on top of him; the fact that she managed to fire first was just sheer dumb luck. She barely saw him, her eyes that had dilated to compensate for the darkness had contracted sharply, blinding her against the assault of the bright white LED mag light, so all she had were impressions of a tall man, Caucasian, with dark hair but she had no idea of what he really looked like and she never would.

She fired over and over again until he was down just as she had been taught. His gun fell from his grip as his head was thrown back and the light cut through the darkness showing her exactly what a .40 caliber bullet fired at close range could do to a human body. There was no face, there was barely a head left.

He was dead and she was the one who killed him.

She dropped her gun and grabbed his, if for no other reason than to turn off that damn flashlight but the image of the life she had taken was already firmly etched in her brain. She scrambled away from the corpse and ran; she was numb, going purely on instinct now. Her mind shut off in order to protect her; her psyche split from reason to survival mode. There was a shout from her left and she turned and fired, not even stopping to watch as the body fell before aiming again to her right. The bodies fell around her like plastic mannequins clattering to the floor and still she ran, the blood thundering in her ears as Slade’s broken toys fell one by one.

The rain still cut at her face and hands but she could no longer feel it and she’d long since stopped counting her shots. She didn’t even know how many men she’d killed other than the first two; it could have been four, or six, or even a hundred. All she knew was with every pull of the trigger the gun in her hands grew heavier and heavier until she could barely lift it. She heard it then, his voice in the distance.

Slade.

It was a murmur in the wind, just a collection of highs and lows that she recognized as his deep baritone, his voice deceptively silky as he tore through her team like they were nothing. She could hear the screams and the gunfire…or perhaps it was thunder. Her mind could no longer differentiate between the storm that raged around them and the chaos within.

She whipped her head around to find him when a dark shape filled her vision and she fired again and again until she heard the click of the firing pin.

The figure fell to his knees but all she could see was blood, torn flesh…

…and green leather as he dropped his bow with a clatter.

“Felicity…” he whispered hollowly before pitching forward, falling at her feet like yet another toy soldier.
She sat up, her heart pounding out an erratic tattoo in her chest as she struggled to get air.

“Shh, it’s all right, Baby,” she heard a voice whisper beside her as gentle hands rubbed over her naked flesh. “It was just a dream.”

She swallowed and looked around the room in confusion; it was pitch black. “Did the power go out?”

He hummed in assent, “The storm must have knocked it out,” he whispered.

“I thought the penthouse had a generator,” she said fuzzily before turning in the direction of his voice, “How did you get here?”

She heard him inhale sharply as he pulled her down against him, molding her body to his own. “Did you honestly think a little storm would stop me? That I wouldn’t come for you knowing that you needed me here?” He asked quietly, his fingers toying with her sleep-tousled curls.

She closed her eyes and rested her cheek on his chest, her fingers tripping lightly over muscles and scars, “But the storm…? You shouldn’t have risked traveling in that just to come home to me. How did you even manage to get a flight out?”

“I have my ways,” she felt his lips brush the top of her head. “Besides, you needed me here,” he repeated. His large hands cast down her spine and she shivered against his touch. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” she told him, burrowing her face into the hollow of his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she said with a sob, “I-I didn’t mean--!”

He made a soothing noise and tilted her face up, his lips caressing hers gently, “It’s all right, Baby; I’m here now and I forgive you. I’m sorry, too. I never should have left you like that but I’m here, I’m back, and you’re safe now.”

“Are you leaving again tomorrow?” She asked quietly as her fingertips caressed the stubble on his cheeks.

“Not without you. I’m never leaving you again,” he told her as he rolled them over and slid between the cradle of her thighs, his thumbs stroking against her cheekbones.

“But what about Isabel…?”

“Isabel will get what’s coming to her, don’t you worry about that,” he said with a hint of menace. She felt his lips touch hers and sighed as he trailed kisses across her cheek to nibble lightly at her earlobe. “I won’t let anyone hurt you, I promise.”

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you, too,” he breathed. “Always,” he kissed her again.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed against his mouth, “I really do want to marry you, I do, and I want to start a family with you; it’s just that everything is happening so quickly and then there’s Isabel and Orbital, and Oliver is here…”

He tutted and she felt his lips curve against her skin as he smiled, “I know, love, I know, but everything’s all right now. We have all of eternity ahead of us and they’ll be seen to soon enough; Oliver, Isabel, and the rest of them, I promise. They’ll all fall on my blade sooner or later but you don’t have to worry about it because I’ll be handling that on my own. You’re not to even concern
your tender little heart with the unpleasant details, understood? It’s my job to protect you, love; 
you’re mine, my woman, and no one threatens what’s mine. You belong to me.”

She froze and opened her eyes just as the buzz of the generator came on and light began to filter in 
through the windows revealing Slade’s features. He smiled, “I told you I’d always come for you, 
love; always…”

“…You’ll always belong to me.”

She screamed.

“Baby!”

Hands reached for her and she struck out frantically, falling off the bed hard as she reached under the 
bed frame but her hands hit nothing but wood and metal. She kicked out, striking flesh, and 
scrambled for the nightstand, her hands closing around the gun.

“Stop!”

Hard hands clamped around her wrists and wrestled the handgun away from her. She fought and 
bucked against her attacker, her teeth sinking into his arm as she felt her fingernail crack and bleed 
from where it slammed against the wood of the drawer.

A forearm clamped around her throat in a hold maneuver and she was jerked back into a muscled 
chest, “Enough!” He told her again, his other hand squeezing her wrist in order to force her to release 
her grip on the handgun. “Baby, stop! It’s me, it’s Dick!”

Her breath caught in a sob, “Dick?”

“Yeah,” he said near her ear his grip loosening slightly, “Are you okay?” She nodded, “I’m going to 
let you go now.”

As soon as he let go she turned in his arms, wrapping him in a tight embrace, “It’s okay; it was just a 
nightmare,” he said, running his hands over her hair and back. She began to shake violently and he 
made a shushing sound, “Are you alright?” He asked, rocking her back and forth as they sat together 
on the floor.

She pulled back reluctantly, running her hands over her face that felt hot and sticky with sweat and 
tears, “I’m okay,” she confirmed, clearing her throat before shakily getting to her feet and looking 
around the room, “What time is it?”

“Uh, a little before three,” he said, his brow furrowed in concern as he got to his feet as well. 

She licked her lips and nodded, “Did I wake you? Did anyone else…?”

“No,” he told her. “At least I don’t think so. I couldn’t sleep so I was heading into the library for a 
book and heard you crying in your sleep.” He ran his eyes over her again, “Do you want to talk 
about it?”

“About what?” She asked, sniffing a bit as she tried to regain her composure.

He reached for the box of tissues on the nightstand and handed them to her, “About whatever the 
hell had you in its grip just now.”
She shook her head, “Thanks, but I’m good,” she said as she wiped her face and blew her nose. “It was just a bad dream, no biggie.”

“Just a dream, right,” he said dryly.

“No really, I’m good,” she told him before her eyes caught the smear of blood on his t-shirt, “Are you okay?”

He looked down at where she was staring and grimaced, “It’s not mine. At least I don’t think it is,” he told her as he flexed his bicep to inspect the purpling bite mark she’d left on his skin. “No blood so I’m pretty sure that’s yours.”

She looked down at her hand noticing at last the ripped nail and the blood on her fingers, “Sorry.”

“A bite’s better than a bullet wound,” he said grimly. “Speaking of which, what were you trying to get to under the bed anyway?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly, “I was still in the middle of the nightmare so I wasn’t really thinking clearly.”

Dick looked at her steadily for an extended moment before opening the drawer to her nightstand and peering inside. “A Glock and a Walther? Different,” he said slowly. “Isn’t that a Coke versus Pepsi kind of thing?” She didn’t answer so he removed them from the drawer and popped the clips from both before emptying the chambers. “Does Bruce know you have these?”

“What do you think?” she said tiredly.

“I think he’d hit the roof if he knew you went around shooting people nowadays. I definitely know that he wouldn’t be happy knowing that you nearly shot me because you keep unsecured and loaded weapons next to the bed.”

“I’m sorry about that,” she said slowly.

“It’s okay,” he told her even though the look on his face said otherwise, “I’m just glad it was me who came in here and that no one got hurt. Well, not seriously hurt,” he reached for a handful of tissues and pressed them into her hand. “Come on, we need to get you cleaned up,” he said leading her into the bathroom.

He moved her so her hand was under the faucet and turned the water on so he could wash it out. She hissed as the lukewarm water hit the cut but didn’t move as he gathered the necessary supplies. He grabbed a towel and turned off the water then patted her hand dry and examined the wound carefully, “You shattered the nail pretty good. It went all the way down to the quick. You’re lucky you didn’t break the finger.”

“Go big or go home,” she said dryly.

He gave her a sharp look but didn’t say anything. Instead, he took a nail clipper out of the drawer and carefully removed the broken nail, grimacing in sympathy as she hissed. He applied some ointment then wrapped it in a Band-Aid. “You’re going to have a hell of a blood blister and you’ll probably need a manicure but you’ll be okay. How’s your wrist and hip?” He asked, looking at the fingertip bruises that were starting to surface on her pale skin. “I didn’t mean to hurt you but you were fighting me pretty hard.”

It ached and, on top of the new injuries, she was still feeling the beat down Helena gave her the previous morning. Instead of saying that though, she merely shrugged and reached in the medicine
cabinet for the large prescription bottle of Ibuprofen, “I’ll live,” she said, tossing one of the pills in her mouth and filling a small glass to wash it down.

“You sure?” He asked, eyeing the meds carefully.

“No worse than what I usually deal with during sparring practice,” she told him. Felicity glanced at the red and purple teeth marks on his arm. “Do you want me to put something on that, or...?”

He sighed and reached for the large tube of Arnica cream in the drawer, “It’ll be fine,” he said. “Good thing it’s long sleeve weather though otherwise I’d have a lot of explaining to do.”

“How are your ribs?” She asked. “I think I might have kicked you at some point?”

He grinned at her crookedly and pointed at the large bottle on the counter curling his figures in a ‘hand it over’ gesture, “I’m fine.”

She smiled back and handed him the bottle. He tossed one in his mouth then nodded to her glass which she handed over as well. He took a drink and she asked, “Aren’t you afraid of catching my cooties?”

“Well, you already bit the crap out of me; if you had any cooties then chances are I’m already infected.”

“True,” she said wrapping her arms around herself even though she was hot. Boiling hot, in fact. Her hair was hanging in sweat damp tangles and Bruce’s sweater clung unpleasantly to her back. She wanted to strip down to her skin and take a shower. Even so, she knew from months of dealing with night terrors that no amount of scrubbing would ever make her feel clean again.

Dick must have seen her discomfort because he immediately asked, “Are you sure you don’t want to talk?”

She shook her head, “No.”

“No, you don’t, or no, you do?”

“I don’t need to talk,” she told him.

“What’s with the guns, Baby?”

“What do you mean?” She hedged.

“Don’t try to play me,” he warned.

“You and Bruce throw knives that are in the shape of bats at people, Oliver shoots arrows, I do guns; what’s the difference?”

“There’s a big goddamn difference and you know it,” he told her. “I can’t speak for Queen but you know how Bruce is with guns.”

Her eyes met his, “Alfred has a gun and I know Barbara can shoot.”

“You’re not Barbara or Alfred,” he said pointedly.

“I’m also not ‘Baby’ anymore,” she said evenly.

“Fair enough,” he said quietly. “Do you need me to call Bruce?”
“For what?” She asked in confusion.

“Ba—Felicity,” he said tightly, “you shot a guy and ran two others down with your car then had a nightmare that freaked you out so bad you nearly kicked my ass before shooting me.”

“What was I supposed to do, Dick? Let them hurt me? Wait for someone to swoop in and rescue me when I’m perfectly capable of defending myself?” She asked with a scowl.

“We were only a couple of minutes out—“

“Which I had no way of knowing,” she finished for him. “I handled it; maybe not the way you and Bruce would have wanted me to, but it’s done. Would you have preferred I pretend to be some damsel in distress? That I hand over my keys and gun then let them shoot me with it while I waited for you guys to show up like a good little victim?”

“No!” He said angrily, his brow furrowing, “That’s not what I meant!”

“Then what did you mean, Dick?” She asked.

“I just meant that this isn’t you,” he told her. “You don’t shoot people or run them over with your car or--!”

“And I told you that Baby was dead,” she said cuttingly. “She died, Dick. She’s been gone for a long time and I’m not her anymore. This is who I am now; I shoot people and run them over. In fact, I do a lot of things that ‘Baby would have never even dreamed of doing.”

“Like kill people?” He said coolly.

Her heart clenched but, to her credit, she didn’t balk, “Like kill people,” she agreed.

He flinched, “Bruce said you took out Deathstroke by yourself.”

“I did, yeah,” she said quietly.

“When I walked in you were saying his name; in fact, you were screaming it.” His eyes seemed to bore into her, “What was the dream about?”

She shivered and shut her eyes tight, “You know, I think I’m going to take a quick shower and try to get some more sleep.”

He let out a frustrated breath but nodded, “Fine.” He looked at her carefully, “Do you want me to stay? I can wait out in the bedroom and lay down with you until you’re asleep or I could wake up Luke and have him stay with you instead.”

She smiled slightly, “I don’t need to be tucked in and read Dr. Seuss before bedtime, you know. I’m kind of a grown up.”

“I’m just trying to be supportive,” he told her. “I know what PTSD is like; I’ve been known to have a few bad nights myself and it helped having someone there beside me.”

He wasn’t wrong; in fact, had it been Tim offering to spend the rest of the night with her she wouldn’t hesitate but, while she and Dick were friendly, they didn’t have that kind of relationship. Tim had always treated her like Luke did but Dick…

…Dick was always nice to her but he never looked at her like a little sister or spent an extended amount of time with her. Besides, while he’d never been inappropriate or even given her even a hint
that he might be considering something like that, it would only lead to more problems. She didn’t want to have to explain to the others why they shared a bed when he had a perfectly good room upstairs.

“While I appreciate the offer, I don’t think that would be a good idea,” she told him with a crooked smile. “Bruce would find out and, being the territorial pain in the ass that he is, I’d never hear the end of it. Besides, even though it was all perfectly innocent, you’re going to have enough problems explaining that bite mark to your girlfriend without having to add that you also spent the night in my bedroom.”

“First off, I think I can manage to keep my hands to myself and Bruce knows I would never mack on his girl. Well, except Selina and that was only the one time.”

Her jaw dropped, “You and Selina? Really?”

“It was just one kiss—well, maybe two kisses…and some other stuff,” he said flashing his teeth, “Secondly, I don’t have a girlfriend anymore so I don’t have to worry about explaining myself to anyone.”

“What about ‘Kori’; the eight foot tall alien princess with the fire, um…hair?” She asked, biting her lip.

“Fire, um, hair? Barbara, right? Yeah, Tim told me about the Princess Firecrotch thing,” he said wryly then leaned against the counter.

“She didn’t mean it in a bitchy way,” she said quickly. “Well, not in a bitchy *mean* way.”

“S’kay,” he shrugged then offered her a naughty grin. “Besides, her race is naturally hairless other than what’s on top of their heads and faces. My guess is that it has something to do with the fire thing.”

“I really didn’t need to know that,” she muttered. “Of course, it would be nice to never have to wax or shave ever again. Don’t know about the whole fire hair and flying thing though.” She looked at him sheepishly, “Afraid of heights.” His eyes glittered with amusement and she asked, “What happened?”

His smile faded and was replaced with a slightly forlorn look, “We broke up.”

“Sorry,” she said with a half-smile, “I heard you guys were pretty serious.”

“We were,” he told her. “Like I was waiting for her to come down the aisle serious, but shit happened and it ended before we could finish the ‘I do’ part.”

“Wait, you were actually getting married and you didn’t tell anybody?” She smacked him on the arm right over the purpling bite mark.

“Ow!” He said, moving away slightly, “Damn! I told you we *didn’t* get married!”

“But you had the wedding and didn’t invite me or anyone else?” She asked and he dropped his eyes guiltily. “Why would you do that?”

“Because, frankly, I didn’t want to get into it with Bruce,” he said gruffly as he rubbed his arm. “I figured he’d give me the whole ‘marriage and mission don’t mix’ speech and I wasn’t in the mood. Besides,” he said with a grimace, “given the fact that I hooked up with Barbara when I was engaged to Kori then literally wound up leaving her at the altar, pulled away emotionally from everyone,
hooked back up with Kori only to break up with her again, I’m kind of glad no one was there to see the whole train wreck unfold other than my team. It was embarrassing enough as it was.”

“You hooked up with Barbara while you were with Kori?” She asked, scandalized.

“I’m not proud of it,” he said reluctantly, “but yeah. She didn’t tell you?”

“No!” She slapped his bite wound again hard causing him to yelp, “God, you really are a dick, you know that?”

“I know, okay!” He said as he rubbed his arm with a pained look. “I didn’t set out to hurt anyone, I just…” His lips tightened, “I was in love with both of them and…”

“Say no more,” she said wearily. “Did Barb know that you cast her into the role of the other woman?”

He winced, “Yeah. I sort of told her afterwards.”

“You ‘sort of’ told her?” She repeated slowly.

He shifted his weight nervously and looked up at her with a sheepish expression, “I kind of started off with the words, ‘we need to talk about last night’ then handed her a wedding invitation.”

Felicity’s jaw dropped and she flushed before clapping her hand over her eyes in disbelief, “Oh my God, you’re all idiots. All of you are just so incredibly stupid.”

“Yeah, it…it didn’t go well,” he said with a pained expression. “She really didn’t tell anyone?”

“No…” she said slowly, “Would you?”

“Guess not,” he admitted. “I guess I probably blew it with her, huh?”

“Oh my fucking God, you think?”

“Yeah,” he breathed, “Thought so.”

She gave him a sympathetic look, “What happened with Kori?”

“Stuff,” he answered drolly. “Same shit that always happens when a Bat meets a girl; I fucked it all up then went down in flames. What happened with Deathstroke?”

“Stuff,” she echoed. “Basically what happened to you only my flames were due to the explosive device I attached to his armor.”

He arched his eyebrow, “Yeah, ‘stuff’ really sucks, huh?”

“To say the least,” she agreed.

“Have you been having a lot of those?” He asked, nodding toward the bedroom.

“Not for a while,” she said truthfully.

“How long is ‘a while’?”

“Few weeks, give or take,” she said in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

“Since coming back home?” He supplied.
She didn’t answer but he nodded as if she had.

“What do you think set you off; the carjacking?”

“Probably,” she said taking a centering breath before answering, “It’s just…it’s been a long day and a lot of stuff happened, plus Bruce and I had a fight right before I nodded off so…”

He snorted, “Yeah, well, fighting and Bruce kind of go hand in hand. Was it about this Orbital thing?”

“No, believe it or not,” she chuckled, “I asked him not to talk to Lucius about us getting married until after this whole thing was settled and he not only went ahead and did it anyway but he told my dad that we were both living together and having sex and that he wouldn’t mind if I got pregnant before the wedding but that it was okay because then we could just ramp up the timeline in order to spare our kid the stigma of illegitimacy.”

He shook his head, “Damn, well,” he blew out a breath and blinked, “I don’t know what surprises me more; that Bruce thought that would fly with Lucius or that he’s this gung-ho about marriage and babies in the first place. Not to mention the whole ‘giving up the mission’ thing.”

“For the record, I never asked him to do that,” she said seriously. “If he wanted to keep the cowl I was okay with it; the same with the marriage and kids thing. I was fine with just keeping things quiet and between us.”

“First off, Bruce doesn’t do anything he doesn’t want to do, so you really don’t have to sell me. He’s just always been so damn…” he made a growling noise, “I mean, he’s had a few serious relationships but he never let them interfere with the mission. I think he went so far as to talk about marriage a couple of times but there was never any real intent there and he never wanted kids; not biological kids, anyway. He adopted us but, even then, it’s not like he was in it because he had a burning need to be a parent. We were all damaged like he was, kindred spirits; adopting all of us was just another way of securing the mission for him.”

“He cared about you; all of you,” she told him. “Even back when I first joined and you guys fought like cats and dogs, I could see that he was trying.”

He smiled, “Maybe. Anyway, you always saw the parts of Bruce the rest of us couldn’t,” he pushed away from the counter and shoved his hands into the pockets of his sweats, “You know, I take it back, I’d be surprised if he felt this way about anybody else *but* you. You were always the exception to the rule with him. With all of us, really.” He looked at her with that steady stare that was so like Bruce’s, “Do you want all this? Bruce, marriage, kids?”

“Churchill and Chrysanthemum and dinner by seven,” she joked and at his look of confusion she smirked, “Inside joke. Anyway, I love Bruce so…”

“I know you love him; you’ve always loved him. Even when you were a little kid the only time I ever even heard you speak was with Bruce or Lucius. Honestly, for a while there I thought you were a mute.”

“You did not! I was just this weird looking kid that you never even noticed before I came down to the cave and you know it,” she snorted.

He offered her a crooked smile, “Okay, well, you might have a point but, in my defense, it’s not like we ever really hung out unless it was with Barb or Tim.”

“And now, look at us,” she said gesturing around the room, “finally bonding in the bathroom.”
“Well, I offered to bond in bed with you but—” He closed his eyes and shook his head slightly with a chuckle, “Yeah, that didn’t come out right.”

“No, no it didn’t,” she snorted despite herself.

“Are you going to be okay if I head back upstairs?” He asked her.

“Yeah.” She pushed her hair off her neck where it was clinging to her skin in wet tendrils. “You know what, uh, I’m probably going to just take a shower and get something to eat.”

“I should warn you, there might not be a lot of food left.”

“Are you kidding me?” She asked incredulously.

“Hey, running along rooftops in the cold builds up an appetite,” he told her. “It’s called ‘carbo loading’.”

“You guys are lucky you’re so physically active,” she muttered. “As it is, if Luke ever slows down he’s going to gain five hundred pounds.”

“There might be a couple of salads left,” he offered.

“Thanks,” she told him then smiled, “And thanks for…”

“Don’t mention it,” he said giving her a soft look. He leaned forward, his lips grazing her cheek then paused, “Goodnight Felicity,” he said before pulling back.

“Goodnight,” she told him.

He gave her one last look then closed the door behind him.

She looked around the bathroom and sighed, “At least the day from hell is officially over.”

Let’s just hope today turns out better, she thought as she stripped off her clothes and stepped into the shower.

There’s no way it could get any worse, right?

Chapter End Notes

https://www.pinterest.com/cjjingram/

That has various clips to explain some of the backstory and characterizations as well as inspirations and, yes, the outfits. Also, sorry about the delay but the power went out for most of yesterday and today. Mea Culpa.
Chapter Fifty-Two

Chapter Notes

Sorry this was so terribly late but this was a particularly long and difficult chapter at almost 100 pages long. Hope you enjoy it. More notes at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Chapter Fifty-Two

She took a shower but didn’t linger, merely taking the time to scrub her skin and wash the sweat from her hair before toweling off and heading back into the bedroom to change. Her night terrors always filled her with a lot of pent up energy and she just wanted to get out of that room and away from the ghosts that haunted the shadows and the one-eyed boogieman hiding under her bed. She never felt safe in her bedroom after one of her Slade dreams, or any bedroom apparently. Even though logically she knew he’d never stepped foot in Bruce’s penthouse, it still felt tainted by his
presence somehow. If she were alone in the apartment, she could watch television and indulge in her Nick at Nite and infomercial obsession or jack up the stereo just for the noise but she didn’t want to disturb anyone else tonight. It was bad enough that Dick saw her like that.

He was definitely going to call Bruce, she thought miserably.

She knew she had PTSD, she knew that it wasn’t healthy to hide guns under the bed or avoid sleep by ordering cheesy kitchen gadgets and overpriced beauty products (although the mineral based make-up was okay as was the Wen hair care system, and she really did enjoy the Rotisserie Grill until Bruce and Oliver destroyed it), but she also didn’t want to talk about it. There were things that happened that night that she still couldn’t get her head around, things that made her think that she might have gone a little insane for a while there, and she certainly didn’t want to deal with Bruce’s bluster as he dragged out every detail when she didn’t even understand it all. For better or worse she was dealing with it and, while tonight was a bit of a setback, she was getting better.

Better than she was before, anyway.

She sighed, pulling out a heather gray jersey nightgown and robe. He was going to tell Bruce, then Bruce was going to give her the third degree over it, plus he apparently knew all about Slade and had informed the rest of his team. Yet another reason to be annoyed with him.

No, not ‘annoyed’, she corrected; pissed.

She was pissed.

It was private; what happened to her was her business and no one else’s. While that might sound irrational as hell, that’s how she felt about it. It happened to her, not them, and if she wanted other people to know the details she would have told them but she didn’t. She didn’t even talk about it to her own team and they were right there with her. He had no right to tell Dick and the rest of them, no right at all!

She let out a harsh puff of air, “Of course, Bruce probably doesn’t see it that way,” she muttered.

No ‘probably’ about it, she admitted. Everything and anything to do with her was ‘his’ business, or so he thought. It wasn’t though, not about this. She could take a lot, but this was too much. This was hers and, yeah, maybe that was a little crazy, but she was the one who had to deal with what happened that night every time she closed her eyes, not him. Taking that from her, sharing that with other people, it was a violation.

She never asked him about the night his parents were murdered, just like she didn’t ask Oliver about the island unless it was absolutely necessary. Slade was her island, her Crime Alley; revealing that to other people without her permission or knowledge…it was disrespectful. It would be like her telling him to just get over seeing his parents being murdered by getting therapy or telling Oliver to get plastic surgery for his scars. It wasn’t something that could be fixed like that and, by inviting other people inside of her pain, he’d opened a door that allowed other people to judge her for her actions.

Dick was a good man but she saw the look in his eyes as he unloaded her weapons. Okay, so maybe he was right about keeping them unsecured, but he could never understand what she went through, none of them could. Slade touched her intimately against her will, put his lips and hands on her, violated her home, and made her feel as though he’d crawled inside of her head and contaminated her with his darkness. Some days…

Some days when the nightmares were really bad like last night, she’d wake up wishing she could drown the entire world in tears. It was days like that, bad days, that she would take her guns and stop
by the station to get Lance after work. He never even had to ask anymore; he’d just take her down to
the police range to shoot and then they’d go get dinner before she headed to the foundry. It was their
private bonding time although sometimes Dig would tag along but that was fine. Neither man pushed
her, there were no hard questions, because they both understood what it was like to come back from
a war and, as Dig once told her, she was a soldier now just like him.

The guns made her feel safe, in control, and no one had the right to judge that; no one.

She swallowed. Sometimes she wondered if she was tainted somehow, if whatever madness had him
in its grip had transferred itself to her. Sometimes, in her darkest thoughts, she wondered if he was
right; if he really was the only one who ever saw her. Sometimes she would think about what he said
about Shado, how he saw Shado’s soul drift inside of her. In the early morning hours when the
exhaustion would hit and she couldn’t stop herself from nodding off, when the dreams would come,
always ending with him holding her in his arms and her melting into him, she’d question her own
sanity. When she got really loopy, she’d even get a little esoteric and wonder if maybe when she
killed him his soul hadn’t somehow possessed her, if he hadn’t become some kind of dark passenger
who was attempting to gain his revenge by invading her dreams.

She’d had that dream or something similar to it dozens of times and it was always pretty much the
same, at least it was in the beginning. It always began with the memory of her running in the dark, of
killing the man in the old barracks and fighting her way to Slade. After that, it changed but always
ended with Oliver dying because of her. Sometimes she shot him like she did in the last dream,
sometimes Slade brought down his sword and separated his head from his neck as she watched. In
the really bad dreams, the ones she had right after it happened, Slade would hand her his sword so
she could issue the killing blow and, as she brought the blade down and watched the light fade from
Oliver’s eyes, he’d slide his hand over her hip and whisper in her ear how proud he was of her and
how much he loved her before she whispered it back.

The last time she’d had that particular dream she wound up scaring Thea so badly she moved out. Of
course, Thea just muttered something about needing to help Oliver and giving her back her space,
but she knew it was because of the night terrors. She’d fallen asleep and woken up screaming his
name to find Thea just staring at her in shock and embarrassment. When the other woman told her
she was leaving she wanted to beg her to stay but didn’t; she just smiled and told her she understood.
She missed her though.

They were still friends, still relatively close, but she sensed a cooling off in their relationship for a
while after that. It wasn’t until the Sewer King debacle that she started coming over again but she
never moved back in. She missed it, missed coming home to another person. For a while there, Sara
and Thea were like her home. Just knowing someone was there waiting for her made it hurt less, it
distracted her, and when they were gone, Sara staying with her mom before joining Orbital and Thea
to Oliver’s place, all she could do was throw herself even harder into work and the mission. When
the dreams seem to have stopped, she hoped they were gone forever; she hadn’t had a night terror
since right before she left Starling, but now they were back and, now that everyone knew what had
happened that night, she felt more exposed than ever before.

“This sucks,” she said miserably. It did; it sucked! No one else knew what she went through that
night. They didn’t know what she’d had to do, the decisions she had to make. Sara was right; it was
one thing for guys like Bruce and Dick to handle that kind of situation on their own without having
to use lethal force but she had been all alone in the dark with no one to save her and her team but
herself.

She felt her anger begin to rise to the surface again along with the urge to get out of that room and
away from all of the things that reminded her of Bruce. Slade’s ghost wasn’t the only thing haunting
her there; her skin crawled and it felt as though Bruce’s eyes were watching her, judging her, just as Dick’s had done.

She glanced at the bed then averted her eyes just as quickly. She was still tired. She’d avoided sleep for too long and that was part of what fed the night terror; whenever she went too long between naps they always got worse.

She didn’t tell anyone but she actually nodded off in the Lair right after it happened. She’d gone days without sleep, so many she’d lost count and couldn’t even see clearly enough to drive so she had to take a taxi there. When she woke up she was kneeling in the middle of Verdant crying desperately because in her dream she’d dropped the detonator and couldn’t find it. She woke up to the sound of Slade’s laughter in her ears but, even scarier than that, she had no idea of how she’d gotten up there or what would have happened if the club hadn’t been closed. Somehow she’d managed to walk up the stairs, unlock the door, and walk all the way to the dance floor in her sleep. Had she done that when Verdant was open she could have hurt someone like she hurt Dick, or worse, someone could have called the police and it would have exposed their entire operation. She’d never walked in her sleep before or since, but it scared the crap out of her. After that she started to sleep more. She’d force herself to lay down for at least a couple of hours a night but never if someone else was there.

If Sara or Thea were there she’d pretend to sleep then leave the bed to work or leave her apartment to go paint Diggle’s place or feed Lance’s fish. Sometimes she’d go over to Roy’s apartment to cook then freeze casseroles for him to heat up when he got home. She started cooking so much food she ran out of room in his freezer and began cooking at Lance’s place instead. After he came home, she moved on to Dig’s place. All three men came to her separately later to thank her and she merely smiled and told them they were welcome but, in reality, she kind of wished they hadn’t come home as quickly as they had. By the time Dig returned, she had nowhere else to go so she’d just drive if she couldn’t sleep. There was a Starbucks’ that was open 24/7 near Dig’s place and a couple of all night Dunkin’ Donuts near Lance’s condo. They got so used to her making her rounds that the people working the night shift would see her car and already have her order ready by the time she got to the window.

She’d wait until work ended then sleep on the couch in Oliver’s office until the nightmares woke her then she’d drive to the foundry and keep Thea company at the club. A few times she fell asleep on the mats in the Lair and, on more than one occasion, her keyboard, but she always found time to sleep during the day. It was easier to sleep when the sun was still up. Her circadian rhythms were all over the map as a result so even on the rare occasions that the dreams left her alone, she would still wake up after only a few hours rest. After Oliver came back to work she couldn’t do that either so she started sleeping in her own bed again and occupied the rest of her time by integrating LAIR into the QC servers between infomercials which was how she caught Isabel red-handed to begin with. Truth was, the first time she’d ever slept the entire night through in dreamless slumber had been in Bruce’s or Oliver’s arms. Their presence seemed to keep the monsters away.

Until tonight.

It wasn’t his fault though; she knew that half the reason the fight with Bruce had affected her so badly was because she was already teetering on the edge. She’d been up too long, hadn’t been eating properly…

She glanced at the bed again. She couldn’t afford to be irrational or emotional right now; she needed to find a way to get some sleep or she really would be forced to see a doctor soon and drugs, as she’d learned by watching both Bruce and Oliver refuse them for years, meant you were giving up some of your hard-won control to whatever it was you were taking. If she started taking a prescription sleep aid that could quite easily become a habit she couldn’t break. She’d tried the OTC stuff and all that
did was make her sluggish and increase the intensity of the dreams. No, she’d rather deal with the infomercials, thank you very much.

Maybe Tam was right; maybe she should think about getting a dog or a cat or something. Just something that could curl up in bed with her when Bruce wasn’t there because, frankly, tonight proved that she was becoming a little too reliant on his presence and that was a slippery slope especially given his recent behavior. She still loved him, but…

She scrubbed her hands over her face and made a noise of aggravation; she was so goddamn confused about everything it wasn’t funny.

Maybe she’d stop by a couple of pet stores or a shelter in the morning just to look around. How she’d manage to take care of a pet with her schedule was beyond her but she could at least have fun cuddling a few. Tam used to call going to the pet store, ‘getting a fuzzy Band-Aid,’ and likened it to holding a friend’s baby; all of the fun of having one without having to deal with the poop. She could really use a fuzzy Band-Aid at that moment, that’s for damn sure.

She slipped the soft nightgown over her head then pulled on the loose shawl collared robe even though she was still a bit warm. She needed to do something, go somewhere…

She glanced at the clock on the nightstand and noted it was still too early to make breakfast…not that she had any groceries anyway. Hopefully the trucks had cleared the snow well enough that traffic shouldn’t be too congested because she had a lot of errands to run, that’s for sure, starting with returning the car. Even though Bruce told her not to, she figured that any business connected to Orbital probably wouldn’t ask too many questions and, if they did, she’d figure it out but she wasn’t giving Bruce the satisfaction of fixing it for her. She opened the top drawer of the dresser and bit her lip, “Oh wow, better put socks on the list,” she muttered. A few days ago there had been a few dozen pairs inside and now, somehow, she was down to just a few. How she’d managed to go through that many of Bruce’s socks she had no idea.

She glanced over at the hamper of clothes inside the bathroom, “And laundry, definitely need to do laundry and dry cleaning,” she muttered as she made her way to the closet.

She hadn’t bought any slippers (she added that to the list as well) but she did have a couple of pairs of Ugg’s. Luckily they were stuck deep in the back of the closet otherwise Tam might have found them and tossed them in the garbage whether they belonged to her or not. At the height of their popularity in the early 2000’s, Tam felt they were basically a blight on the universe and vowed to drive a wooden stake through any she found, setting herself up as the ‘Van Helsing’ of ugly footwear. She thought she was kidding until she came home to find her sister trying to feed a pair she recently purchased into the paper shredder. After that, she stopped buying them.

Felicity liked them though; what they lacked in appearance they made up for in comfort. They were warm and snuggly and made you feel like you were walking on pillows. Literally pillows; Uggs were like fleece-lined mattresses for your feet and, after a twenty-hour day in pencil skirts and high heels, she was all about comfort when she got home: No bra (that sometimes came off in the car on really long days), usually no panties, and very expensive pj’s that had nothing to do with sexy and everything to do with soft.

No matter what Tam said, Donna Karan was her personal goddess of all things warm and fuzzy with the quirky geniuses at ThinkGeek.com filling in the rest.

She was ordering a new pair of killer bunny slippers, plus she was definitely getting that Fourth Doctor bathrobe she saw the last time she went on their site.
She purchased a few pairs of Uggs in Killinger’s, including some fleece lined sneakers, but she particularly liked the cream colored crocheted booties she snatched from their hiding place in the back of Bruce’s closet. She wiggled her toes and grinned at the fuzzy warmth that surrounded them. They were far too warm to wear back in Starling but here in Gotham, and in the Felicity Cave specifically, they’d be perfect. At least down there she could cool off and keep busy until the others woke up.

She slipped on her glasses, twisted her still damp hair up in a loose top knot, then snatched a clip off the top of the dresser to secure it before making her way out of the bedroom and towards the study. It was quiet and still in the penthouse, made even more so by the lack of furniture. Tam had managed to pick up a large sectional, a second shorter couch, a low table, and a couple of right and left mirrored double-wide chaise lounges she set up at the far end of the room overlooking a view of the city. She barely paid them any attention earlier but they appeared comfortable and would work for practically any design they could come up with. The large chaise lounges were done in a soft moss green chenille fabric and the couches were upholstered in dark distressed leather. They reminded her of that aviator jacket her brother once owned that she would steal every chance she got until he gave it to Tim before leaving for Africa. She’d been so mad about that, too. By then she’d pretty much claimed ownership of it, but Luke just rolled his eyes, apologized, and bought her the pair of killer bunny slippers Oliver and Bruce murdered in exchange.

Yeah, Bruce was springing for a pair of the K-9 slippers, too. They would go perfectly with the Tom Baker robe he didn’t know he was buying her yet. If she stayed pissed long enough she might even make him spring for the TARDIS footie pajamas she’d been looking hard at before leaving Starling.

“Good luck breaking into the butt flap of my new union suit, pal,” she muttered. She spared the couch another look; she was definitely having an online shopping spree later…

Tam knew her better than she knew herself sometimes. She could easily imaging curling up with a book and a cozy throw blanket as the snow fell outside the windows but she wasn’t really in the mood to relax despite the lingering exhaustion tugging at her eyelids. She did note however that the snow was falling in gentle flurries now so hopefully she could get all of her errands done in one go without worrying about traffic delays.

She walked inside the office, stopping to run her fingers down the statuette’s feathers as had become her new habit, before accessing the panel to the cave. She paused near the handprint scanner and frowned. There was a dull sticky sheen over the glass. She touched it with her fingertip then brought it up to her nose.

“Great,” she said flatly before accessing the elevator and heading down. “Might as well get it over with.”

As soon as the doors to the elevator opened she heard the rhythmic slap of his hands against the Wing Chun dummy she’d ordered but hadn’t yet uncrated. She looked around and noted that, not only had Oliver managed to unpack it, but he’d also found the mats, sparring equipment, and the free standing heavy weight bags. She also noted that he’d chosen to create a layout very similar to the Lair back in Starling City. Whether he did it out of habit, or to make the statement that he had claimed this space for himself, she didn’t know but she suspected it was the latter.

“I see you found the equipment,” she said, walking towards the Watchtower console where the rest of the unopened boxes and crates remained untouched.

His hands continued to slap against the highly polished teak slats of his own target, “I figured that since I’m apparently going to be here for a while I might as well unpack some stuff,” he said at last.
“You’re not staying here,” she told him, leaning against the workstation. “And, by the way, you didn’t have to use that much adhesive on the palm scanner; a little goes a long way. Now I have to clean that up because the maids don’t exactly have access.”

His hands stilled and he turned to her, “I needed to work out and I figured that you wouldn’t appreciate it if I woke you up to let me in. However, if you don’t want me getting the scanner sticky then you could go ahead and add me to the system so I wouldn’t have to go through all the trouble of bypassing it. Not that it was that much trouble,” he added dismissively. “You’d think a guy like Wayne would have better security for his Lair.”

Felicity flushed even though she’d pretty much said the same thing, “First off, this isn’t Bruce’s ‘Lair’, it’s the FelicityCave—”

“The FelicityCave?” He snorted.

“Yes, the FelicityCave,” she said with a scowl, “and I’m planning on upgrading everything as you can see,” she gestured toward the crates Alfred delivered to the alternate site over the last several days using the series of tunnels that led back to the primary Batcave. “Secondly, I don’t need to add you to the system because you aren’t staying here.”

“If you’re staying, I’m staying,” he told her, “So you might as well assign me a passcode and scan me into the system. Oh, and since you’re here,” he said blithely, “I’ll need you to order some more equipment; some weapons racks, a grindstone and tools, and maybe a salmon ladder,” he offered her a knowing look. “After all, I know how much you ‘like watching me do that’. I’ll give you a list and you can charge it to Wayne.”

God, he could be such a stubborn, arrogant, pain in the--! “I’m not ordering you anything! What about QC? The mission? You can’t stay here forever, you have things to do back in Starling!”

He snatched up the towel he’d draped over one of the empty crates and wiped the sweat from his eyes before turning to her, “I don’t intend to stay here forever but I will if that’s what it takes to get you to see reason. I can always relocate to Gotham; open a branch of QC here and bring the team along for the ride. I may just decide to give Wayne a run for his money, who knows? Either that, or we can just trade,” he gave her a hooded look.


“Why not?” He said off-handedly. “I’d sign over the whole damn thing if that’s what it took to get what I wanted out of the deal,” he said as his eyes raked over her, making it more than obvious what his terms for such a trade would be.

She flushed, “I’m not an object or some possession you guys can trade back and forth!” She said indignantly.

“I know that,” he told her blithely, “but does he?”

“Yes!” She snapped, “And I don’t appreciate the fact that you would even joke about something like that!”

“Who says I’m joking?” He asked her.

“You’d better be,” she said darkly.

“About which part? The part where I think Wayne is a tool who is fully capable of using you to get what he wants or that I would give up my mission and my company if that’s what it took to get you
back? Because, if you’re waiting for me to call bullshit on either of those, you’re going to be here awhile,” he told her. “I meant what I said; whether you choose to accept it or not, Wayne doesn’t give a shit about anybody but himself and his mission. Even your brother, as pissed as he is at me right now, knows that, so I’m here to bring you home. No matter what it takes, or what I have to sacrifice, I’m not leaving until you’re ready to come home with me.”

“What do you really want, Oliver?” She said wearily, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I already told you, several times; I want you to come home,” he said, approaching her slowly then stopping only a few feet away, “With me, where you belong.”

The look in his eyes was making her nervous so she focused on the clothing draped over her chair instead. “Shirt, huh? I thought you usually went commando under the hood?” She asked, nodding towards it. “Well, from the waist up anyway,” she added. “I’ve seen you in your briefs so I know you don’t…not that I noticed or anything,” she shook her head. “Never mind.”

“It’s a lot colder here than in Starling,” he told her with a slight smile, inching closer. “And you’ve seen me in a lot less than boxer briefs, remember?”

“Why are you doing this?” She asked in exasperation, ignoring his overt flirting.

“I love you,” he said, the smile leaving his face.

“No, you don’t,” she told him flatly as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“Yes, I do,” he said firmly as he stepped even closer.

“You’re here because Bruce asked me to marry him!”

“You’re goddamn right,” he said angrily. “That’s exactly why I’m here because you and I both know that you marrying Wayne would be a mistake!”

“No, you’re here because you expected me to wait on you forever,” she told him. “If you really loved me, you would have made your move long before Bruce ever showed up!”

“That’s a bunch of crap and you know it,” he told her. “Even before Wayne showed you knew that I was in love with you!”

“No, I didn’t,” she said, drawing her eyebrows together in consternation.

“Bullshit,” he told her. “Even Roy knew I was in love with you and he can barely figure out how to count to eleven without taking off his shoes! I’ve loved you for years just like you’ve loved me and *neither* of us ever said anything because we didn’t need to; it was understood!”

“No, it wasn’t,” she snorted. “And if you really did love me like you claim to, you would have acted on it a hell of a lot sooner! Like three and a half years and a certain Helena Bertinelli sooner! Hell, I would have settled for two and a half years and Isabel Rochev sooner! If you were in love with me this entire time then there is no way you would have slept with everyone else in your orbit *except* me!”

“That’s not true,” he told her. “I told you why I couldn’t be with you.”

“No,” she chuckled darkly, “You told me why you couldn’t be with *Laurel*, remember?”

He scowled at her, “Back in Russia, yes, I was talking about Laurel, but I was also talking about

She rolled her eyes, “Oh, I’ve not only heard of it, some days I feel like I’m drowning in it.”

His jaw clenched, “The night I slept with Isabel she was talking about you; about how everyone in the company thought we were sleeping together.”

“So you screwed her in order to protect my reputation?” She asked dubiously.

“That was part of it, yeah.”

“Oh please!” She erupted, “Thanks for pimping yourself out just to save my nonexistent reputation but I’m sure you could have done it without having sex with that woman!”

“It was complicated,” he told her. “I needed to distract her and—why are we even discussing this? This is ancient history, remember? What happens in Russia—!”

“Moved its skanky ass to Gotham!” She threw back at him, “So it’s not ‘ancient history’ when I had to deal with it groping me last night in the middle of Midtown traffic!”

“Isabel groped you?” He asked in surprise.

She offered him a contemptuous glare and ignored the question, “How many times over the years did we come close to having something, Oliver? How many times did you look at me like you wanted to kiss me then pull away at the last possible moment with some speech about how you couldn’t care about anyone before hooking up with someone else right in front of me?”

“Too many,” he said, his eyes dark as he inched closer. “And, because I didn’t act sooner, because I was too stupid to see what I was losing by not being with you, I’m stuck in some goddamn subway tunnel dealing with Bruce Wayne and his bullshit instead of curled up with you in what should have been our bed a long time ago!”

She opened her mouth then shut it uncertainly before furrowing her brow, “Well…it’s…it’s too late. I love Bruce and I’m marrying him,” she told him.

“No, you aren’t. You can’t marry him because you don’t love him; not as much as you love me,” he said confidently as he moved close enough that she could feel the heat radiating off of his skin.

“How do you know?” She snorted, trying to get some distance as she stepped back.

“I know you told Sara that you’d come home if I asked, then repeated it to Laurel a few hours ago,” he pinned her with a steady gaze, “Don’t even bother to deny it. But even if you didn’t mean it, even if you’d never said those words, I know you love me because I’ve fought beside you for almost four years,” he said, his hands reaching for her shoulders as he locked his eyes on hers. “I’ve struggled alongside you, fought with you, trusted you, bled for you, I’ve killed for you, and nearly died for you, and you’ve done the same for me. I love you,” he said, his voice now a low rumble that made her skin flush. “I’ve loved you for so long I can’t even remember not loving you anymore, and I’m not willing to lose you to anyone else; not if I can help it.”

“And yet you couldn’t say those words until now,” she said, attempting to regain her composure. “Why is that? How is it so easy to say it now—?”
“Do you think this is easy for me?” He asked her harshly, his hands tightening on her shoulders. “Do you think those words don’t mean anything to me? That telling you I love you doesn’t scare the shit out of me?” His head dipped closer, his eyes never leaving hers, “Everyone I’ve ever tried to love has died because of me and the ones that survived were never the same. I leave scars, Felicity; loving me makes people bleed and I’ve never loved anyone as much as I love you. By staying away I thought I was protecting you even though it killed me not to touch you. I tried loving other people; Sara, Laurel, Helena, McKenna… I tried being with them because, as much as I cared about them, they didn’t scare me, not like you. Had they died I would have mourned them but had anything ever happened to you it would have ended me.” His hand cupped the back of her head, his fingers weaving into her hair as the clip fell onto the floor causing it to tumble over her shoulders messily. He brought her head close, his lips so close to hers that she could feel the displacement of air from his breath against them. “Every time I saw you bleed for the mission I’d pull away because something in me would die. I knew—I *knew* I could never love another woman, but I tried, because…” he swallowed, “You’ve always terrified me, Felicity; I’ve loved you from day one, I just didn’t know it at the time.”

She placed her hands on his arms and pulled away even though she had to force herself not to just give in, “So, what? Bruce offers me a life and a home and suddenly all that stuff you told me about how dangerous I am to the mission gets tossed out the window? Less than a few weeks ago you basically threatened to have me run out on a rail if I even showed my face in Starling again and now, all of the sudden, you think it’s okay to say all of this to me? That’s not fair, damn it!” She said angrily, tears pricking her eyes. “It’s not fair to do this to me when I finally have someone who wants to give me the kind of life I…!” She choked up.

“No, no it’s not and I know that.” He grimaced his eyes falling from hers in shame, “I knew I made a mistake letting you go the minute I did it. I wanted to have a life with you, figure out a way for us to be together, but I thought…”

“What?” She asked him. “That I would be okay with being alone? That you could just hit the pause button and I’d wait for you to figure it out?”

“I don’t know,” he told her. “Maybe, I don’t know.” He looked at her again, his gaze heavy with emotion, “I’m an idiot, okay? I’ve never been able to be rational when it comes to you and, even though I probably should walk away, I can’t. I can’t let you go, never again.”

“I can’t, I…” She turned away from him, her hand rubbing at her forehead wearily, “I’m not leaving Gotham but, just for argument’s sake, if I did agree to go back with you, what then? What is it that you think would change?” She turned back to him and pulled her robe tighter around her, “Don’t bother answering that because I already know; nothing. Nothing would change, Oliver. The minute I stepped foot in Starling you’d get cold feet and come up with yet another reason why we can never be together. You’d push me away then pull me back the second you got lonely and, in the meantime, I’d be stuck in a basement watching you live your life while I’m relegated to the role of tech support with benefits. I’d be stuck acting as your EA again only, this time, I really would be sleeping with my boss until such time as someone else came along to warm your bed.”

“That won’t happen,” he said firmly, his eyes flashing angrily. “There is only going to be one woman in my life from here on out and that’s you.”

“It would happen,” she told him with equal assurance, “I know it, you know it, and I can’t keep going backwards, I just can’t. You’ll come up with some excuse and then, all of the sudden, I’m going to be sitting at my workstation trying to make myself as small as possible while you and whatever kick ass supermodel turned mask succeed in making sparring look like foreplay.” She took a centering breath, “I could do that before we slept together but I can’t do that anymore. That
distance is gone and I can’t get it back, and I certainly don’t have it in me to make friends with the next woman you make it work with after telling me it can’t ever work with me.”

“And being with Wayne isn’t you going backwards?” He shot back then took a step forward, crowding her once more, “I sent you away, yes, but I thought I was protecting you!” When she opened her mouth to object he stopped her, “I sent you away and ever since then I’ve barely been able to function without you. I nearly got myself killed the other day because you weren’t there on the other end of the coms to talk me through it!”

“So, what? This is because you need me to run coms for you?” She said with a slight sneer.

“No, goddamn it!” He nearly shouted as he reached for her again, pulling her close, “I’m telling you that I can’t eat, I can’t sleep, I can’t get my head in the game without you, and…” he tightened his mouth angrily, “When Wayne left you, he stayed away for four years, Felicity; *four years*! I couldn’t make it a month without hopping a plane and coming after you; that alone should tell you exactly how I feel!!”

“But the fact remains that you wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t found out that I was marrying Bruce and you know it,” she said quietly. “If I’d stayed away from him, you might never have come for me.”

“No,” he told her, “I would have come for you eventually.”

“Eventually,” she repeated. “And how long is ‘eventually’? Months? Years? Who the hell do you think you are? The world doesn’t revolve around you, Oliver! I have the right to be happy even if it’s without you.”

He ducked his head slightly, averting his eyes for a moment, “You’re right,” he said at last. “You’re absolutely right,” he repeated, his eyes capturing hers again. “Not only that but you were right about the rest of it as well. I came here intending to offer you pretty much the same deal you left behind; a life spent hiding in a basement, risking your life and your freedom for the mission, while you wait for me to get my head out of my ass.”

“So what’s changed?” She asked, placing her hand on his chest in a gesture not of intimacy, but to maintain some distance although that distance was hard to come by as she felt the thrum of his heart slow under her fingertips and his body relaxed at her touch. “What are you offering me, Oliver?” She said in as cool a voice as should could manage but knowing that she was failing miserably. “Marriage and babies? Giving up the mission? I don’t think so.”

“Is that what you want?” He asked with an intense look. “Is that why you said yes to Wayne; because he promised you all that?”

“No,” she said sharply. “I never asked him to give up the mission and I certainly never asked for marriage or children but that’s not the point!”

“Then what is the point?” He returned.

She glared up at him, “The point is that he wants me; you don’t!”

“Goddamn it, if I didn’t want you do you think I’d be here right now?” He asked, stepping back with a hurt expression on his face.

“I think this whole thing between you and Bruce has very little to do with me, that’s what I think,” she threw back.
“You’re wrong.” He looked at her for an extended moment before speaking, “When your brother and I arrived here yesterday, do you know what Wayne told us?”

“Honestly, there’s no telling but I imagine it was probably fairly obscene and included threats of bodily harm along with accompanying hand gestures,” she said dryly.

“He implied that you were pregnant,” he said flatly. “More than implied it. He let us twist in the wind for a minute before admitting that, while you weren’t pregnant *yet*, you soon would be.”

She felt her cheeks grow hot with anger and embarrassment, “Yeah, he told me about that.” Some of it, she corrected internally. The part about her already being pregnant was news to her though, “and I chewed his ass out over it.”

But not as badly as she was going to chew him out later, she vowed.

“So you aren’t pregnant?” He asked her, his expression intense.

“No, of course not,” she said, flushing.

He relaxed slightly but his expression lost none of its intensity, “Do you know what I was thinking when I heard that?” He asked her. “I thought that if you were pregnant then it could be mine; that you could be having my baby and I was about to lose a second child because I fucked up again.”

“I’m not pregnant,” she repeated, her face still burning hot with embarrassment.

“But you could have been,” he said, coming closer. “You easily could have gotten pregnant that night and…” he faltered, his hands reaching for her and cupping her cheeks gently so that her eyes met his, “As soon as Wayne said the words it was like a bomb went off in my head. I was…pissed off and scared; I wanted to tear him apart and wipe that smug look off the son of a bitch’s face--!”

“Oliver…” she began.

He cut her off, “But I was also so…” he moved until their bodies were touching, “happy.” He chuckled humorlessly, “I thought, God.” He tipped his head forward, his eyes shut tight, as he pressed their foreheads together and stroked his thumbs along her cheekbones, “For those few seconds I wanted it to be true, I wanted it to be mine and I wanted us to be a family, and then, in that instant, all the plans I had for us flew out the window and I just…”

She took in a sharp breath, “Bruce was…he was just trying to--”

“I know what he was trying to do,” he said with a hint of anger. He pulled away slightly so he could look her in the eye, “but he made a huge tactical error because all he did was make me even more determined to bring you home where you belong because I want that life with you now; only you, do you understand? I want all of it and I’m not running away; I’m staying right here. Where you go, I go; simple as that.”

“What life is it you want?” She asked him incredulously. “You and I both know that you can’t give up the mission--”

“I could, but I won’t; you’re right,” he agreed. “I can’t give it up, not yet, but that doesn’t mean we can’t still have a life together.”

She shook her head slightly, “I don’t…what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I want you back as my partner, both in the mission and in my life,” he told her. “I
won’t lie to you; I don’t know how this will work or how we’ll manage but we always do. We’re stronger together than we are apart so I—“ he grimaced, “This isn’t how I wanted it to be. I always imagined doing this differently with you, I wanted it to be at the right moment, but…” he slid his hands down her arms until he was grasping both her hands in his, “I want you to be my wife; not my girlfriend or my mission tech. I want to have a family with you, children, a home—”

“Oliver, no,” she said, pulling away and stepping back.

“Just listen to me,” he said, reaching for her again but she dodged him.

“You can’t do this to me,” she said, shaking her head. “You can’t come here out of the blue and ask me to—!” she shut her eyes against the sting of tears, “It’s not fair to do this to me.”

“Maybe not, but I’m asking anyway,” he said mulishly.

“I made a commitment to Bruce,” she said firmly.

“You agreed to marry him, yes, but that doesn’t mean you have to go through with it; especially if you’re still in love with me,” he told her. “You love me; you might love Wayne but you’re in love with me.” At her look of pained confusion he stepped forward until he was within inches of her but didn’t reach out, “If you marry Wayne then he’ll take away everything you’ve become; everything you could be. You’ll become just another tool in his arsenal, just one more damn thing he’ll try to control!”

“As if life with you would be any better?”

“Yes!” He said firmly. “Because, unlike him, I won’t rush you into anything you aren’t ready for. I want you, yes, but I also know that having kids this soon would be too much. Don’t get me wrong,” he said stepping forward, “I want children with you, I do, and if they came I’d welcome them even if they came before we were ready, but I won’t try to control you or keep you by forcing you to--!”

“You think Bruce is forcing me into marrying him and starting a family in order to control me?” She cut in angrily.

“I think he’s manipulating you,” he corrected, “but yes, that’s exactly what I think. I don’t know what his endgame is but I think he’s using anything and everything he can to convince you to stay and, as soon as he can, he’s going to close the deal by marrying you and getting you pregnant.”

“Bruce isn’t manipulating me or forcing me to have children,” she told him. “He asked me if I wanted them eventually and I said ‘yes’.”

“No,” he shot back. “He told Luke and me that--!”

“He was being an ass!” She said in exasperation, “It’s practically his natural state of being! He was messing with your heads!”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that but I also know he was dead serious,” he said advancing on her again. “Sara said he already had more than a half dozen names already picked out in fact.”

“What did you guys do; have some kind of team meeting over my reproductive health and future?” She threw back. “Believe it or not, I am capable of understanding how to use birth control! Admittedly, my lack of condom use doesn’t exactly help my case here but I did see a gynecologist—two of them, in fact; one that you paid for! In addition to the roughly $107.48 I spent on Plan B and, by the way, in case you were wondering that’s $49.99 times two plus 7.5% sales tax, I’m on Depo Provera, not that it’s any of your business, so no matter what Bruce has or doesn’t have planned,
there will be no meet-cutes between his sperm and my egg anytime soon!” She took in a gulp of air, “And I don’t know if I’m going to marry Bruce or not or whether we’ll have kids but that is my choice, Oliver! Mine! Not yours and not his,” she stopped, “Well, technically, it’s a little his because he has to marry me back but that’s beside the point. The point is that--!”

Oliver moved forward and pulled her into his arms, his mouth slanting over hers as he swallowed whatever words she was going to say.

She whimpered under the assault but, the second his lips touched hers, a fire ignited within her and, even though her mind was screaming for her to pull away, her body wasn’t listening this time. He pushed her backwards until she was against the Watchtower console then lifted her so he could step between her thighs, his hands cupping her bottom and pulling her to him.

His kiss gentled as his tongue tasted her, his lips caressing hers back and forth and she shivered against him. His hands withdrew from her only to slip underneath her robe and slide over the silky soft cotton as he tested her ribcage then allowed one hand to fall to his side, sliding up her leg to underneath her nightgown. When he got to her bare hip he smiled against her lips, “You know what I love most about you?” He whispered.

“Hmm,” she mumbled as his mouth left hers to kiss down her neck and nibble at her ear causing her to moan slightly.

His fingertips cast over the curve of her hip, “I love that you don’t wear underwear underneath your nightgowns.”

“Not supposed to,” she gasped, her mind going blank as his tongue curled under her earlobe and she gasped. “Wearing panties under your pajamas causes…infections.” His mouth dropped to the sensitive juncture between her neck and shoulder causing her to moan embarrassingly loud.

“All right,” he asked, his hand that was under her gown splaying over her naked thigh as the other cupped her breast through the soft material. “I didn’t know that,” he said huskily.

“Uh huh,” she said, jumping slightly, her flesh breaking out in goosebumps as his teeth scraped against her throat. “Uh, yeah, something about…ahh!” She began to pant as his fingers pulled at her nipple at the same time his fingers moved further up her thigh, “h-heat build-up.”

“I can see that,” he breathed against her lips before kissing her again, “Lots of heat down there, a lot of moisture,” his fingertips began to stroke teasingly over her curls. “Very wet.”

She wrapped a firm hand around his wrist and pushed it away from her center, “Oliver, I can’t--!”

He kissed her, silencing her protests although he didn’t move his hand back, “I can still remember how you tasted that night,” he rumbled against her. “It’s been driving me insane. I keep thinking about drinking you in, the noises you made,” he nipped playfully at her bottom lip, careful not to reopen the cut there that, thanks to the herbs, was very nearly gone. “I remember how you cried out when I slipped inside of you and keep wondering if you’ll make that sound every time we make love or if you have a whole catalogue of moans and whimpers that I have yet to discover because I will never get tired of loving you.” His lips found the corner of her mouth and he kissed her tenderly, “Please,” he said softly, “All I want to do is bury myself inside of you and never stop. Whatever you want, whatever I have to do, I swear I’ll do it; just please love me back.”

“I love you,” she said before she could stop herself, “I do, I love you, but Bruce--!” She cried out against his lips as he kissed her again. It was as though his lips were claiming ownership of hers at that moment and all she could do is ride the wave and hope she didn’t drown.
“Just be with me, please,” he begged her in a voice that was less of a whisper and more of a series of breaths. “I need you.”

She felt her heart tear in half and it was so visceral that she actually felt the pain of it clench inside her chest, “I can’t–!”

“Please,” he said in a voice so filled with want and tears she no longer recognized it as his. “Please, Baby, come home.”

“I can’t,” she said, pushing him away from her at last. She felt as though she were going burst into tears as confusion warred with guilt and desire within her, “I can’t do this.” She hopped off the workstation and held her fingers to her lips as if to protect them, “I can’t be with you Oliver, I just—I’m not this person.” She shook her head, “I’m not,” she said with a sob as the tears she’d been fighting began to escape. He cupped her cheek tenderly and made a soothing noise but she pushed his hand away and stepped back quickly, “No!” She told him. “I’m with Bruce; I’m in love with Bruce. I can’t do this!”

“You can’t marry him,” he told her, his expression tender yet confident. “Not now; not after kissing me like that.”

She wiped her hand over her mouth and tried not to lick the taste of him off her lips, “I may love you, Oliver, but I can’t be with you. I can’t have a life with you.”

“Why not?” He demanded softly, his brow furrowed as he stepped closer to eat up the distance between them both literally and figuratively. “If you want to get married then we’ll get married, if you want children then we’ll have them. If you want me to give up the mission,” he hesitated, “if you really want that then…”

“No,” she said quickly.

“Yes,” he told her. “I can’t—I can’t give it up yet but I can talk to your brother or Tim, see what we can do. Maybe we can work something out and they can take over while I train Roy…”?

“You don’t want that, Oliver!”

“You’re right, I don’t,” he told her with a grimace, “but I’ll do it for you.”

“I don’t want you to give up your mission!” She said brokenly. “That’s not what this is about!”

“Then what is it about?” He asked her in a slightly heated tone.

“I know you,” she told him. “I know that even if you say you’d give up the mission in order to settle down, you’d be miserable and eventually you’d begin to resent me for that!”

“No, I wouldn’t!”

“You would!” She told him, “And if you kept the mission then you’d still be out there every night killing yourself and we’d never have any time to have a life together! You’d still be pushing me away for my own good, or going up against yet another big bad for the greater good! Someone on the team will eventually get hurt or killed, some threat will come for me or our kids, and you’d blame yourself and then you’d blame me for forcing this life on you in the first place!”

“No!” He said, his fingers clamping around her wrist, “No.”

“Yes,” she said, looking at him through tear-filled eyes. “If you had asked me this sooner, if you had
come to me six months ago, hell, one month ago, I would have said yes. I would’ve jumped at the chance to build a life with you; I would--”

“Then do it!” He told her, “Do it. Just come home.”

She shook her head sadly, “No, because even if I was capable of being the kind of person who could just drop Bruce without a second thought, we would never work; not right now.”

“Why not?” He asked her. “If you need to let Wayne down easy then do it, fine.”

“No!” She told him. “It’s not even about Bruce, it’s about you! You’re capricious, Oliver.”

“I’m what?”

“Capricious!” She told him, “It means you’re fickle, unreliable, impulsive—”

“I know what it means, damn it!” He said angrily.

“You’re also reckless,” she told him. “You’re reckless with yourself and the feelings of the people around you and, while I think you’re capable of being a great father and husband someday, that day is not today.” His jaw clenched and she pulled her wrist from his loose grip and laid it alongside his cheek. Even though his anger she could feel as he nuzzled it slightly, “It’s okay though because neither am I. I’m not ready to be a mother yet; I don’t know if I can even handle a dog much less a child…”

“What about Wayne then?” He asked her, not bothering to contradict her this time. “If you’re not ready and I’m not ready, fine; come home with me and we’ll wait until we’re both ready, but he won’t do that for you. He won’t wait and you know that.”

“I don’t…I don’t know what I’m going to do with Bruce,” she said dropping her hand from his cheek, “I know we have to talk and I’m going to have to tell him about this…” she took a shaky breath, “but I know that, even though I’m not ready yet, I don’t want to wait indefinitely. I waited three and a half years for you to just kiss me, Oliver, and the minute we found each other you pushed me away. I can’t keep waiting for the day when you might be ready because that day may never come. I can’t plan a life around us if I have to keep chasing you down and convincing you to stay. I won’t do that to myself and I definitely would never do that to a child.”

“I won’t leave you,” he said in a husky voice. “I swear on my life, I won’t ever run away again.”

“You can’t--,” she began.

“I won’t run,” he said firmly, “and if we had a child I swear I would do whatever it took to keep both of you safe. I would never abandon either of you.”

“Oliver…” she said faintly, her cheeks burning, “you already have a son.”

His eyes widened slightly and he gave her a hurt look, “You won’t try this with me because of Connor?”

She took a centering breath, “No, if Connor was in your life I’d support you just like I supported you when you had Waller put them in witness protection.”

“Then what--?” He asked in confusion.

“You can’t even bring your own son into your life right now, Oliver,” she said in a pained voice.
“Until you can do that, until you can sort out the life you have now, there’s no way you can even think about creating a new one with me.”

He moved away from her, his hand rubbing over his whiskered cheeks in anger and aggravation, “He’s not giving up the Batman,” he told her, his eyes hardening slightly. “No matter what he told you, he’ll never give it up.”

“He doesn’t--!” She growled and clenched her fists at her sides, resisting the urge to stomp her feet in frustration, “It’s not about that!”

“Then what the hell is it about, Felicity?” Oliver asked angrily. “I offered you everything he did—more in fact! If this is about Connor, then, okay! You’re right; you’re always right! I’ll call Trevor, work something out with Sandy--!”

“No! Don’t do that for me,” she told him. “This isn’t about me!”

“Yes, it is!” He thundered back. “I’m here for you and if you need me to fix my life then I’ll fix it but I need you there to help me! I need you, Felicity! Why can’t you see that!”

“You need to do this for you, not for me,” she told him, feeling the tears prick her eyes. “I can’t make your life better for you, Oliver!”

His jaw clenched, “Yes, you can. You just being there makes my life better!” He gave a shout of aggravation, “What the hell is it that I’m missing here? Do you love him more than you do me, because I don’t believe that for a second!”

“He’s--!” She smoothed back her hair, unable to finish.

“He’s what?” He demanded.

“I don’t—I don’t know,” she said shaking her head. She crossed her arms and hugged herself tightly, “I don’t know; I’m just so goddamned confused…”

“Felicity--” he began, reaching for her again.

“No!” She said, moving away and pinning him with an angry look, “No, Oliver; you don’t---no,” she said firmly. “I made a promise, a commitment!”

“So you’re going to marry him because you agreed to something even though you’re in love with me?” He asked heatedly.

“No!” She burst out, “First off, I love him, too!”

“Bullshit!” He snapped.

“I love him just like you loved both Laurel and Sara at the same time so don’t even try to get all judgmental over this, Oliver!” She warned him, “Unlike you though, I’m not running off with one of you while leaving the other one on dry land to get their heart crushed!”

“So don’t make the same mistakes I made with Laurel; break it off with Wayne first,” he told her. “Call him up and tell him it’s over; text him, send the son of a bitch a telegram for all I care, just do it!”

“Goddamn you, that’s not what--! Just leave me alone!” She shouted. “I may not be sure about Bruce at the moment or what I’m going to do about this situation, but I won’t be bullied into
choosing you over him! I made my choice when I told Bruce I was in!”

He froze, “Is that what this is about? You won’t come home because I said I was in then took it back?”

She ran a shaky hand over her hair, “You know what? Yeah, yes; you said you were in then left as soon as the panic set in.”

“I told you why I did that,” he said darkly.

“You ran,” she told him. “I told you not to make promises and you did it anyway then broke them!”

“If I ran then so did he!” He barked.

“He came back!” She retorted. “And he never promised me a goddamn thing—you did!”

“Well, damn it, if he came back then so did I!” He flung back, pacing in aggravation. “What does he have that I don’t; tell me that much,” he demanded.

“I already told you.”

“So tell me again,” he bit out. “And don’t bring Connor or the mission or Laurel into it; those things are all fixable.” She started to speak and he made a slicing gesture through the air, “No! I’m telling you that I will figure something out with Connor and the mission, and Laurel and I have been over for a while now. It’s not about how I feel about you either because we both know that I’m in love with you and that you love me back! All of it, every argument you made, it’s all done! I’m not running, I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere; now, give me a reason, a real reason, why we can’t be together!”

“Do you really want to know?” She asked him.

“Yes!” He growled.

“He has a better track record, for one,” she shot back. “Frankly, I trust him more than I trust you.”

His head leaned back slightly as if physically struck by her words, “You don’t trust me?”

“Not with this,” she said bluntly. “Especially not with Laurel upstairs as a living example of how you treat the women you love when you get scared.”

“I didn’t run away from you, damn it!” He shot back. “I’m not running away now! I’m right fucking here!”

“For how long?” She countered.

“Forever!” He told her.

“And now it’s my turn to call bullshit!”

“Do you want to know what’s bullshit?” He asked her, “Wayne pushed you out of his life four years ago and now you’re marrying him; I’ve only been out of your life for a few weeks and you’re telling me he has a better track record and that you trust him more! That’s bullshit!” He said angrily. “You’re the one running scared here, not me!”

“You’ve been out of my life a hell of a lot longer than a few weeks and you know it!”
“What are you talking about?”

“Slade.”

His eyes went cold, “What about him?”

“I had a night terror tonight; a bad one,” she said huskily, the fight suddenly leaving her. “I woke up in a frenzy; Dick heard me and I nearly killed him because I thought he was Slade, that he was in my bedroom again touching me while I slept.”

Oliver flinched, his expression filling with pain, “Are you okay? Is he?”

She pulled back her sleeve and showed him the bruises and the plaster on her finger, “I’m fine; I bit the crap out of Dick’s arm though and landed a pretty solid kick to his ribs.”

“Let me see,” he reached out for her and she drew back.

“I’m good,” she said, hiding her hand in her robe. “It’s just a broken nail and some bruises.”

“What then? What does all this have to do with Slade?” He asked her, “He’s dead, gone, he’s never coming back!”

“He comes back,” she told him, her voice cracking from the strain of shouting for so long. “He comes back all the time.” She took a deep breath, “I needed you, Oliver. After Slade, after what happened, I needed you and you left me alone; you ran.”

He wiped his hand over his mouth in agitation and turned away, “I told you why I pulled away. I’ve said it fifty times so far and I keep having to repeat myself because you don’t seem to be hearing me!”

“No, you didn’t,” she said, the spark of anger returning to her voice. “About why you sent me to Gotham, yeah, but not why you abandoned me after Slade. All you said was that you were scared that you almost lost me but you never told me why you ignored me for weeks, no months, after that!”

“I was angry!” He thundered. “I was mad as hell because you--!” He made a low growling noise, “You had no right to do what you did!”

“Excuse me?” She said incredulously. “I had no right to do what; save your life?”

“Yes!” He spat out.

She rolled her eyes at him, “Oh my God, do you even know how ridiculous you sound right now?”

“I know exactly how it sounds but it’s the truth!” He stabbed his finger through the air accusingly, “We kept you out of the loop for a reason; you weren’t supposed to be there! He was after you! We all agreed that you would survive! All of us went in with eyes wide open knowing that we were probably going to die but that it was an acceptable risk as long as you were kept safe!”

“If I hadn’t showed up you’d be dead!” She yelled back.

“But you would have been safe!” He repeated advancing on her. “Trevor came to me and all I asked, all the rest of the team and I wanted from ARGUS, was for you and Thea to be kept safe, for you to live, and you took that away from me! I had to lay in the mud, bleeding out and helpless, while I watched that bastard put his hands on you; I had to watch as he…” his jaw clenched, “as he… touched you…and then I saw the detonator and I knew you were planning on killing yourself, on
sacrificing yourself for me!” He loomed over her, “I had to watch my mother die, Shado die, Tommy die! And then you…” he shook his head, “You had no right to put me through that. Not again.”

“I didn’t die though,” she told him. “I lived, I survived, and you disappeared. You were there but you barely even looked at me. You didn’t even speak to me for weeks after you got out of the hospital.”

“I couldn’t,” he said, shaking his head. “I couldn’t look at you because…” He swallowed noticeably. “Every time I looked at you I would get so damned angry. I’d see you and remember the explosion and it was like I was watching you die all over again.”

“I didn’t die,” she told him. “I was right there the whole time; you weren’t!”

“How?” He threw back. “How though? Why didn’t you die in the blast? You should be dead, Felicity! You know that, right? There is absolutely no way you should have been able to survive that!”

She paled and stumbled back, “I just… I don’t know what happened. I—”

“I would look at you and see a ghost,” he told her. “Every time I’d look at you all I wanted to do was reach out and never let go but I didn’t because I couldn’t trust myself around you! I knew that once I touched you it would all be over!”

She looked at him in confusion, “What would be over?”

“The dream! Whatever kind of rabbit hole I was living in because there was no way you were real,” he said in a broken voice. “The others didn’t see what I saw, Felicity. I saw you press the detonator; I saw the explosion. I felt the heat of it on my skin, watched Slade go down--I watched you die! You were in his goddamn arms for Christ’s sake! He had the bomb *on* him and you were right next to the gas tank when it went up! You shouldn’t be here!”

Silence.

Neither breathed or spoke.

“How?” He said quietly. “How are you still here?”

“I don’t know,” she breathed.

“Tell me something, tell me anything; how?” He asked her.

“I just…” Images flooded her mind of time seeming to stop, the explosion abruptly freezing all around her, and the rest of them still and silent as stone like images paused on a television screen while she was somehow still able to move. She felt the bile rise in her throat as her mind seemed to twist and there was a pain behind her eyes like the beginnings of a migraine, “I can’t…I can’t talk about it.”

“I was so angry at you that I couldn’t trust myself around you anymore,” he told her, averting his eyes. “You killed yourself for me. You were still alive but the fact remains that you tried to kill yourself *for me*, and I was so filled with anger and resentment over that, I didn’t know how to function around you anymore.”

“Well, if you had just come to me, stuck it out, we could have figured it out together; instead you took off for the hills and buried yourself in Laurel and Sara again,” she corrected, the pain behind her eyes easing slightly.
“Yes,” he said sharply, “but so did you! You ran straight for Wayne! You went from my bed straight to his then agreed to marry him in a matter of weeks! Weeks! Even I’m not that goddamn ‘capricious’, Felicity!”

“Oh yeah?” She said roundly. “You told me to go to Gotham, you told me to let Bruce in!”

“I told you to date the son of a bitch, sleep with him if you wanted to, not marry him!”

She gave a harsh bark of laughter, “So it was okay if I just slept with him a little, used him as some kind of plaything while I traded in my dignity and self-respect for a nice roll in the hay; but falling in love and building a life with him? That’s the part you object to?” She asked incredulously.

“Yes!” He hissed, “And if you weren’t in denial you’d realize that whatever this insanity is that you’ve got going on with Wayne, it isn’t love; it’s just you looking for a way to fix something!”

“Fix something?” She asked, the pitch of her voice rising.

“Yes, fix something!” He repeated. “Whatever it is, this is about you fixing something!”

“What is it that I need to fix?!”

“You’re broken, damn it, and you think marrying him will fix everything but it won’t!”

“How do you figure?” She asked sarcastically

“You were going to kill yourself!” He said heatedly. “You said it yourself; you can’t sleep, you’re barely eating—goddamn it Felicity, you’re not thinking rationally right now and you know it!”

“I’m irrational?” She said incredulously, “How is making a commitment to a man who loves me irrational? How was saving your life irrational? How is making the decision to save thousands of people irrational? Every time you go out you put your life on the line! How is what I did any different?”

“I’m not you!” He said so loudly her ears rang. “Do you honestly think I could just carry on after losing you like that? What the hell were you thinking?!”

“I was thinking that if I didn’t do what I did that Slade was going to kill thousands of people and I had to stop him!” She stormed back in a voice that was equal, if not better, in both anger and volume. “I was thinking that I didn’t want to live if I had to keep going without you and the team!”

He shook his head slowly, “And you thought I would? The only reason I’m not dead now is you! If you hadn’t saved us, not just with Slade but from the very beginning; if you hadn’t shown up when you did to help our mission, I would have been dead or in prison within months of coming home. If you hadn’t come back for me after Tommy died, or talked me through the thing with the Blood Army, or even…” he took a breath, “held me when I lost Connor… You’ve always been the way home for me.” He stepped closer, his eyes meeting hers. “Your voice has always led me back from the darkness. If I had lost you, I wouldn’t have survived it.”

“You told me that what we had wasn’t love,” she reminded him. “That whatever this is or was for you was destructive, dangerous…”

“Yeah, I did. Whatever this is, it’s more than just love,” he told her. “It’s something deeper than that, something primal and dark that can’t be defined or summed up with a simple word like ‘love’. It’s like what I feel for you goes beyond just emotions or physical attraction; I don’t know what it is but
love doesn’t even begin to describe it.” The breath left her lungs and he reached out to cup her cheek, “I saw you and, for the first time in my life, I saw the light come into the room. It was like I’d spent my entire life in the dark and then you just flipped the switch and I smiled for the first time in five long, fucked up years.” His thumb stroked her cheekbone as he came closer, his head dipping towards hers slightly, “The first time I touched you, the first time you held me, it was as though I’d never touched another human being before and I was just lost inside of you. It scared the hell out of me because those touches, those little bushes of your hand against mine, the hugs; I could feel my skin tingle for hours afterwards and I realized then just how dangerous that could be for both of us. I tried making it work with other women, I tried feeling for them what I felt with you but, even when it came close to being love with them, compared to what I felt for you…it was like I was hollow inside.” He pressed his lips to her hair, “Then, that day in the conference room…” His head dipped closer until their foreheads were touching, “I don’t know what happened but the dam broke and I needed you. It’s like I was filled with this uncontrollable impulse and I couldn’t stand it anymore, I just reached out and grabbed you and didn’t want to let go.”

His lips caressed her forehead and when her eyes fluttered closed, he kissed her eyelids, then trailed kisses over her cheeks as she swayed toward him. “I knew I should stay away,” he brushed his lips against hers, “I knew that, but I couldn’t. It was like the walls fell down and whatever this was between us couldn’t be stopped or held back for even another minute. I had to claim you in a way that was purely instinctual, make you mine in a primal way and I couldn’t stop. As utterly gross as that sounds, I needed to be inside of you then and there and, God help me, when you put the brakes on I barely managed to hold myself back.” She gasped as he bit at her lips teasingly then moved his mouth to her ear. “It took everything I had not to pull you back onto that conference table. I barely kept it together when we went upstairs afterwards, first in the elevator, then in the office. You tried handing me that damn resignation and I couldn’t risk you even coming near me, that’s how far gone I was. When we made love that first time,” his lips drifted back across her cheek and he tilted her chin up with his fingertips until he was speaking against her lips, his mouth caressing hers like a kiss with every breath, “I felt whole; like I finally found something that had been missing my entire life, so when Wayne implied…”

“Oliver,” she breathed and he silenced her by pulling at her lips with his own in a gentle but intimate caress.

“I wanted it to be true,” he told her at last. “I wanted us to have made a life together that night because, in that place inside of me where whatever this is lives, it felt right. It was perfect; that night we were together, it was perfect. It felt like it was something that had to happen, that should happen, that was always going to happen, and I knew that if you were pregnant that it was mine because it had to be. Even if it wasn’t, it was still mine because you were mine and I was yours.”

His lips found hers again as he pulled her closer and she felt something burst inside of her. All the emotions she was feeling, all the confusion, desire, guilt, love; all of it was poured into that kiss. He touched her and it was like electricity sparked in her veins just like the first time she touched Bruce—Bruce.

She broke off from the kiss and pushed him away gently, “I can’t,” she said, turning away.

“You want me, Felicity,” he told her in a way that wasn’t accusing, merely a statement of fact. “You can’t marry someone else as long as you’re still in love with me.”

“I have to…I have to go,” she told him heading toward the elevator.

“Felicity--!”
She turned towards him, “You can’t stay here. After today you need to find somewhere else to stay because I can’t do this with you and I won’t be the kind of person who can just betray someone I love like this.”

“But you love me,” he told her. “Right now, by being with him instead of with me, the only person you’re cheating is yourself. You’re hurting yourself and that’s what’s going to hurt him in the end; not you leaving, you staying.” He gave her an ironic smile, “Believe me, I’ve been down that road before. I should have left Laurel long before I got on that boat but I kept going back because she didn’t want me to leave her.” He gave her an almost pitying look, “Don’t destroy yourself by trying to make it work with him. Don’t be me, Felicity; just be *with* me and put us both out of our misery.”

“I love Bruce,” she countered. “I love you but I’m in love with him and until I figure this out you can’t be here.”

“I’m not leaving,” he said, his eyes sparking with a hint of triumph. “I’ll get out of your apartment as soon as I find something else, but I’m not leaving town because you and I both know that this isn’t over.”

She didn’t say anything, she merely got inside the elevator and allowed the doors to close between them.

*

Hours later she was laying on the couch tapping away on her tablet. It stopped snowing a little after five and the sun rose a little before seven but no one in the house stirred. Vigilantes, she’d learned a long time ago, were not morning people. She’d already sent a text to Wildcat and was just waiting for a response. Oliver had come upstairs shortly after she did but didn’t try to join her, a fact she was grateful for. The pale morning light cast over her as she continued to Google Fish, her mind tripping over the random facts as she followed the links one by one.

Her phone buzzed beside her and she put down the tablet to look even though she already knew who it would be.

She picked up the phone but before she could speak, Bruce was already talking.

“Dick called me last night and said you nearly shot him.”

“I had a nightmare,” she said, trying to keep her voice down so she didn’t disturb her houseguests.

“He said it was a bit more than just a nightmare,” he said, his voice tense. “Do you want me to tell Lucius I’m coming home early?”

“No.” She took a deep breath, “Bruce, we need to talk…”

“Don’t,” he told her, obviously catching the note of pained regret in her voice.

“I have to tell you something--”

“I know what you’re going to say, Baby, and I’m telling you; don’t. Don’t do this, not over the phone, not when I’m in Metropolis and can’t get to you, and not because we had one stupid fight!”

“I can’t marry you.”

“Yes, you can,” he said firmly.
“I’m not ready,” she told him.

“You had a bad night,” he told her. “Dick told me you--”

“You told Dick about Slade,” she told him, pulling her knees close and curling into the couch.

“He needed the information,” he told her.

“No, he didn’t,” she told him. “It wasn’t any of his business just like it wasn’t any of yours!”

“It is my business!” He said angrily. “If it concerns you then it’s my business!”

“It was my secret, Bruce; mine! If I wanted you to find out I would have told you! You had no right to go digging into what happened then tell other people about it before asking me!”

“I didn’t go digging around; Queen’s sister blurted it out when I was video conferencing with his team!”

That made her pause, “Oh,” she said quietly.

“Yes, ‘oh’,” he shot back. “But you should have been the one to tell me first. If anyone should be mad right now, it’s me!”

“When did…?” Her voice trailed off.

“Yesterday morning and then your friend Lance shared some more details with Tim who relayed all of it to me afterwards,” he sighed. “Notice that I knew *before* I met you for lunch but didn’t press you for details even though I damn sure wanted to! I told Dick, yes, but by then it was already out there and I was trying to get ahead of the information before he found out about it from someone else. I didn’t betray your trust, not intentionally. I would never do that, Felicity. I know what it’s like first hand to carry that kind of burden. I know how it feels to take that pain and squirrel it away inside of you.” She could hear as he shifted the phone against his ear, “My parents died in front of my eyes when I was eight years old and I spent the rest of my life feeding that pain and hatred inside of me. I guarded it like it was something precious because it was the one thing no one could ever take away from me, so *I know*! There’s no one on the entire planet who understands you and how you feel better than I do.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s okay,” he said quietly. “I love you, and I would never intentionally cause you pain.”

She felt her face go hot, “I know; I know you wouldn’t.”

He paused, “Is that what your dream was about? What happened six months ago?”

“Yes and no,” she said burrowing further into the couch and tugging the blanket she dragged out of her room tight. “Most of it.”

“Dick said you were screaming his name.” She didn’t bother answering him so he plowed on, “You said he didn’t hurt you.”

“He didn’t,” she said automatically.

“Dick said that you had two loaded weapons next to the bed and it appeared that you were going for a third under the mattress. What happened?” When she didn’t answer his voice softened, “What happened with Slade, Baby? What did he do to you?”
“He…” she swallowed then glanced around making sure no one else was listening in, “He came inside my house when I…”

“When what?” He prompted.

“I was…I was asleep and he…” The tears started coursing down her cheeks and she choked up, “He came inside my bedroom.”

She heard him suck in a pained breath, “Did he…?”

“No,” she said sniffing, “No, but he could have; he said he thought about it. He said he…kissed me and touched my things. He knew about a dress I bought and when we were talking he…he put his hands on me, on my face and my…” She let out a shuddering breath, “He touched my…my…” she shook her head, she couldn’t say it, “He said I belonged to him and that he…” She broke down into a sob.

Bruce made a soothing noise through the phone, “Okay; it’s going to be okay, Baby. You don’t have to say anything else,” he said quietly. There was a slight pause as though he were debating something, “Okay, I’m coming home; I’ll be there in a couple of hours. Just stay put and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“You can’t,” she said, shaking her head. “You have the thing with Lois Lane…”

“I don’t give a damn about that!” He told her. “You’re more important to me than Lois Lane or the newspaper!”

“You should stay there,” she told him. “I’m just…I’m just tired,” she said stiltedly. “I haven’t had a dream like that since coming back to Gotham; I’ll be fine. It’s just…”

“Just what?”

“I stopped having them when you were with me and you weren’t here last night,” she admitted quietly.

She heard him curse softly under his breath, “I want you to pack a bag and I’ll call Alfred to come get you. You can either fly down here and stay with me or you can stay at the manor until I come home and then we’ll figure things out with Lucius later.”

“I can’t, I have to go back to Orbital tonight,” she told him.

“Screw Orbital,” he told her. “I told you I was pulling the plug on that!”

“Bruce, we can’t chuck the whole mission just because I had a bad dream,” she said wearily.

“This isn’t just about some nightmare; if you’re tired, if you aren’t 100%, then you’re going to make a mistake and get yourself killed,” he said firmly.

“I’ll get some sleep,” she promised him.

“Baby, you just told me that you can’t sleep if I’m not there,” he told her.

“I can sleep, I just…” she sighed, “I can’t keep using you like a security blanket; I’ll figure it out.”

“I don’t want you going in if I’m not there,” he told her. “Besides, sleep or no sleep, I don’t want to leave you alone any longer than I have to. And, for the record, I don’t mind being your security blanket.”
She laughed softly, “I didn’t think you would.” She went quiet, knowing what had to come next but not looking forward to it.

“Baby?” He asked after several seconds of silence on her end. “What is it?”

“Um…” She took a deep breath, “I need to tell you something. Last night…” she bit her lip, “Last night, after I woke up, I went down into the cave to work on Watchtower and Oliver was there.”

“What happened?” He asked, his voice tense.

“Um, he asked me to come home with him and then he…” she licked her lips, “he kissed me…a few times.”

There was silence on the other end of the line and, for a moment, she thought he might have hung up on her. When he finally spoke she nearly jumped out of her skin even though his voice was barely above a whisper, “Did you have sex with him?”

“No,” she said quickly. “I wouldn’t--!”

“Okay,” he breathed. “What else happened?”

“He told me he was in love with me and asked me to marry him,” she said, her cheeks hot. “He said he wanted to give me what you offered and…and things got kind of complicated after that.”

“What does that mean? What did you say?” There was no anger in his tone, merely pained acceptance.

“He…he kissed me again, things got…we didn’t really do anything but it was fairly intense. He wanted me to tell him how I felt and I told him I loved him but that I was in love with you and would never hurt you like that.” She took another centering breath, “I would never cheat, Bruce. I would never start something with Oliver without ending it between us first, but I’d understand if you wanted to break things off. He might have been the one to kiss me but I let him and, even though we didn’t have sex, we easily could have if I hadn’t put on the brakes.” She sniffled, “I’m so sorry, I never wanted to hurt you,” she said brokenly. There was silence on the other end of the line and now it was her turn to ask, “Are you still there?”

“I’m here,” he said huskily and she could hear the pain in his voice, “What about you? Do you want to end it with me?”

She shifted on the couch, “No. I don’t know,” she closed her eyes. “I don’t…I’m still not sure about what happened yesterday. I don’t like that you went to my dad and said all that stuff to Luke and Oliver. I’m sure that had a lot to do with why I let what Oliver said get to me.”

“What did he say?”

She squeezed her eyes tighter, “That you were manipulating me and the only reason I agreed to marry you was because I was still reeling from the thing with Slade and acting irrationally.”

“Do you think he was right?”

“I think you were being manipulative, yes,” she admitted. “Oliver said you implied that I was pregnant; that you taunted them with it,” she said with a hint of anger. “For a minute there he thought it could be his.”

“I told you about that yesterday,” he said, his voice tense.
“Not all of it,” she said sharply. “You didn’t tell me that part of it.” She grimaced, “Oliver lost a child recently, did you know that? Not ‘lost’ as in ‘dead’ but ‘lost’ in that he doesn’t know where he is and has no relationship with him.”

“No,” he told her. “I knew he paid some girl off and gave up his parental rights--”

“He didn’t pay her off,” she corrected angrily. “His mother paid her to tell him she had a miscarriage then hid his son from him until Malcolm Merlyn showed back up and tried to kidnap him. He gave up his parental rights and had ARGUS put them in Witness Protection in order to keep them safe.”

“Ah,” he said, his voice filled with regret.

“That was a shitty thing to do, Bruce; it was cruel and using me and our private business as a weapon against someone is unacceptable. I don’t like it and I certainly don’t like you bulldogging me into marriage by going to my father and making all these plans behind my back.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “You’re right.” He sighed, “Baby, I know I can be a manipulative bastard but, honest to God, I wasn’t trying to hurt you. As for Queen,” she could practically see his scowl in her mind’s eye, “Okay, I went too far but he was talking about taking you away from me…”

“Marriage is a partnership, Bruce; not a dictatorship. I don’t ‘belong’ to anyone; if I do marry you then we’ll belong to each other equally,” she said firmly.

“‘If’?” He repeated. “Does that mean…” he paused, “Are you calling it off?”

She hesitated, “No,” she told him at last. “I want to be with you, I do, but I don’t want to be rushed into this and I don’t want to have kids right away. I know you want them sooner rather than later but I can’t. I nearly…” her voice dropped to a near whisper, “I nearly shot Dick. What if I have a night terror and hurt you or freak out some day and hurt our child? I don’t know if I can trust myself…”

“I can take care of myself and if and when we have kids I’ll be there right next to you because I trust you,” he told her. “No matter what Queen told you, you are the most rational person I know. You might not have handled the situation with the carjackers last night the way I would have wanted you to but, according to Barbara, all of the assailants are alive and while their injuries were serious, they weren’t life threatening.”

“But I easily could have killed them,” she told him.

“Look, before I called you, Barbara sent me the police reports and it turns out that these men were connected to at least three other carjacking’s and at least one drive-by in which there were casualties. At least one of them is being booked on capital murder charges because one of the victims was an elderly man on blood thinners. When he didn’t give up his keys fast enough he hit him several times with a tire iron and he died; that very easily could have been you last night.” She could hear the strain in his voice as he spoke. “If you had gotten out of the car they would have attacked you even if you had turned over your keys and purse; every one of the attacks were violent and they were escalating. As for the GSW you were responsible for,” he made a disgruntled noise, “I’m not happy about the guns, Felicity; I’m never going to be good with you having a gun, but even the police report is saying that they suspect the gunman of being someone with a police or military background because of the precision and tight pattern of the gunshots. None of the men they arrested are talking so, chances are, they won’t be looking for you anytime soon and there’s no way in hell those guys are going into lock up telling a story about how a petite blonde heiress put them in the hospital.”

“But what if I had killed them?” She asked him. “What then?”
“Were you trying to kill them?”

“No.”

He took a moment before speaking, “I don’t believe in murder and I don’t believe in guns, you know that, but you did what you had to do.”

“You don’t mean that,” she said irritably. “Don’t lie to me, Bruce! You and I both know that had I killed those men—!”

“I would have been upset,” he said cutting her off, “but not at you. Those men were murderers, Felicity; Slade was a murderer. I’m not going to judge you for what you did because, frankly, I’m just grateful you’re still here.”

“You wouldn’t have killed Slade,” she said confidently.

“I almost did,” he told her.

She did a double-take, “When?”

“The first night we were together, the cut on my arm?” He said quietly.

“That was Slade?” She said in surprise.

“I didn’t know it at the time, but yes. Someone in my Rogue’s Gallery hired him to take me out and the only way I survived it was by knocking him off the roof of a twenty story building.” He let that sink in before continuing, “That wasn’t the last time I faced Deathstroke either. I had my own history with him and the idea of you being anywhere in his orbit… She heard a rasping noise as his hand rubbed over his mouth. “I’m glad the son of a bitch is dead because if he wasn’t, after hearing that he came after you like that, I would have been tempted to hunt him down and kill him myself.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” she said faintly.

“Probably not,” he admitted, “but I sure as hell would have thought about it.” He paused, “Baby, I trust you, I trust your instincts, and while I agree that you need time to heal I don’t think you’re crazy or irrational; you’re just…you’re just a little broken.”

“Broken,” she chuckled humorlessly.

“We’re all broken,” he told her. “But unlike the rest of us, you can heal and get past this, and no matter how long it takes, I’ll be there for you.” He seemed to hesitate for a moment, “Do you want to go to therapy? I could ask around…?”

She snorted, “First off, even if I did go to therapy, what could I say that wouldn’t either get me locked up or sent to the nut house? Secondly, you think therapy is bullshit.”

“No, I don’t,” he objected.

“You had the Foundation fund Arkham just so you could make it into your own private prison,” she told him. “You figured out that as long as the inmates were declared insane you could keep them locked up indefinitely. Plus, every other freak you’ve ever locked away was a shrink themselves!”

“Not *every* other freak,” he said mildly then sighed, “Okay, so I’m not a big fan of psychiatry, that doesn’t mean you can’t go or that we can’t find a way to get through this together.”

“Like what? Couple’s vigilante-ing?” She suggested. “I could get my own set of leathers and we
could roam the night together?"

“It’s a thought,” he said dryly. “Honestly, I don’t want you out in the field but I do think we need to keep up your training, especially after last night. I think it might help you work through some stuff and I’d feel better knowing that you’re safe.”

“You’d train me?” She asked in surprise.

“Yes.”

She froze, “Seriously?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, “But if I train you then we get rid of the guns. I know you’re good with them, that’s fairly obvious given what Lance and Diggle told Tim, but we don’t use them on my team. We’ll find you something else but you need to turn over the weapons you have stashed at the penthouse, understood? Give them to Dick and he’ll take care of them.”

“Can I think about it first?” She asked him cautiously.

“Do you need to?” He asked with a hint of surprise.

“Yeah,” she told him. “While I appreciate the offer…I’m not sure I want to join your team and I feel better having something here to protect myself. I’m not really ready to give them up yet.”

“Baby, you’re safe at the penthouse, I promise,” he told her softly. “An army couldn’t get inside once you put it in lockdown.”

“I got in,” she reminded him.

“Baby…”

“Look, last night was a setback but I was getting better,” she told him reluctantly. “Being away from my old place helped and, until last night, I felt safe here but giving them up...I don’t know.”

“Was it the carjacking?” He asked. “You said so yourself, you haven’t had one of those episodes in weeks. Maybe firing your weapon last night triggered something?”

“That was probably a big part of it,” she admitted. “The fact that Oliver and Luke tried to get into a brawl in the kitchen didn’t help matters either.”

“Okay, that’s it,” he said angrily, “Queen needs to leave the penthouse immediately.”

“You don’t care that he got into it with Luke,” she scoffed.

“You’re right, I don’t, but he upset you and I don’t want him anywhere near you so he needs to get the hell out of my building!” He said angrily. “I still don’t know what he was doing there in the first place!”

“Technically, I’m still the lease holder,” she pointed out.

“Felicity…” he said warningly.

“Okay, fine,” she sighed. “To tell you the truth I already told him he had to find somewhere else to stay but then I remembered that the Gala is in a few days and every room in the city is probably booked solid.”
“I’ll handle it,” he told her. “Tell Queen to get his crap together and I’ll send a car to get him.”

“What are you going to do? Have Alfred pop him in the trunk then have someone from Wayne Shipping crate him up and mail him to Antarctica?” She teased.

“I wouldn’t waste the postage,” he muttered darkly. “No, I was going to suggest he either stay in the manor or you do, one or the other, but he doesn’t need to stay with you.”

“I can’t leave here,” she told him firmly. “I already have eyes on me, I can’t move into the manor until all this is settled.”

“Fine, then he and Dick can stay at the manor until I get back.”

She snorted, “You’d really open your home to Oliver willingly?”

“Willingly”? No, but I’ll do it anyway if it means getting this business with Rochev settled and him out of town,” he told her. “In the meantime, what do you think it would take to make you feel safer that doesn’t involve guns because, and I’m sorry for putting it like this…”

“You think I could hurt someone if I have another night terror,” she finished for him.

“I trust you, Baby, I do, but what if your sister had walked into the room instead of Dick?” She made a slight noise and his voice softened, “Listen, I’ve been there, we’ve all been there; I nearly snapped Alfred’s neck coming out of a night terror once early in my career, but it served to teach me to never keep weapons near the bed for that very reason. The guns need to go or at least remain in one of the safes until you’re ready to get rid of them.”

“Fine,” she told him. “I’ll buy a fast box later.”

“I told Dick to take them back to the manor and secure them there,” he told her.

“Un-tell him because they’re staying with me,” she said firmly.

“Fine,” he said reluctantly. “There’s a safe in the study in the floor under the desk. I’ll text you the combination.”

“I can figure it out on my own,” she told him. “But whether or not I use it is my choice, Bruce. I don’t want to be that far away from them in case I do need to defend myself.”

“Well, what would help make you feel safe enough to keep them locked up tight?”

She thought about it, “I thought…I thought about maybe getting a dog.”

“A dog?” He asked. “What kind of dog?”

“Not like a killer attack dog or anything,” she told him. “Just something to sleep in the bed with me when you aren’t here.” She sighed, “That’s probably a stupid idea…”

“No, a dog could work,” he told her. “Let me call Alfred and talk to him first and then we’ll see about getting you a dog, okay?”

“I figured I’d just go to the shelter…” She said uncertainly.

“No need,” he told her. “Alfred will handle it. Look, I’ll try to get this business settled as soon as I can. I have to get off the phone in a minute and meet your dad before we go to the hospital and then we’re flying into Metropolis this afternoon. I figured I could suit up and go after Mallory later tonight
then come straight back to Gotham. If all goes well I might even be home before you get back from Orbital since, no matter what I say, I already know you’re going in anyway.”

She ignored his sarcasm and frowned, “You think you’ll be able to get him to crack that fast?”

He chuckled darkly, “He’s a trust fund snot with more education than brains; one look at the Bat and he’ll be pissing his pants.”

“I don’t know,” she said doubtfully. “If he’s connected to HIVE…”?

“We don’t know that yet,” he pointed out. “According to the doctors, what happened to Lane might’ve been due to an underlying medical condition.”

“A medical condition that can hack servers and erase files?” She asked drily.

“Doubtful, but we still can’t be sure that Mallory is HIVE or that HIVE had anything to do with Lane’s collapse,” he told her. “I seriously doubt an organization like that would place any strategic value on a corporate climber like him, plus Lane’s public collapse isn’t their usual MO.”

“Fine, just be careful,” she told him. “We’ve seen what HIVE can do and, trust me, even Batman can’t handle that all by himself.” She paused, “What about that Metropolis vigilante; Superman? You could try finding him; ask him to be your back up?”

“I’m not making contact with some flying meta human I don’t already know and trust,” he told her.

“I think he’s an alien, not a meta; at least that’s what Lois Lane’s article said anyway,” she pointed out.

“I don’t give a shit if he’s Santa Claus; I don’t know him,” he told her. “It’s just a simple interrogation; I don’t need back up.”

“I’m sorry, did you just say you were flying in blind with no back up and barely a plan? Who is this and what have you done with Bruce Wayne?”

“You’re hilarious,” he said gruffly. “Fine, how do you suggest I get in touch with this ‘Superman’ then?”

“If she’s awake then Lois might be able to tell you,” she suggested. “Maybe he gave her a cell or a contact number? It’s what either one of us would do.”

“Her memory has been completely mangled, remember? She can barely remember her own name right now.”

“What about that other guy, Kent?” She suggested. “They work together right? Maybe he knows.”

“Because Bruce Wayne asking him how to contact Superman followed by an appearance of Batman wouldn’t raise any red flags with an investigative reporter,” he said sarcastically.

“Fine, whatever,” she said giving up. “I just figured that since it was his city that you might want to do the polite thing and clue him in on what’s going on under his nose.”

“If he’s as ‘super’ as he claims to be then he can figure it out on his own,” he told her.

“Are you making fun of his choice of handle there *Batman*?” She asked pointedly.

“Point taken,” he said wryly. “Speaking of handles, from now on over coms you need to find a
“Technically I already have a handle,” she told him.

“What is it?” He asked curiously.

“Starling,” she told him.

“Starling,” he said flatly.

“It’s a bird,” she shrugged.

“You named yourself after a type of bird that is basically a feathered locust?”

“You named yourself after a flying rat,” she shot back. “At least the animal I based my handle on doesn’t carry rabies.”

“Point taken,” he grumbled. “You sure it has nothing to do with Queen?”

“No,” she told him rolling her eyes. “Sara’s the one who came up with it; she was talking about birds and I just chose it, that’s all. If you don’t like it, fine; I’ll go by Oracle whenever I’m on your coms.”

“No, Starling’s fine,” he told her. He went quiet for a minute, “Are we…are we okay?” She hesitated and he added, “I know you said we were but I just want to make sure; are we still together or do I need to scrap my plans and come home so we can work this out face to face?”

“I love you, you know that,” she said softly.

“You love him, too,” he pointed out.

She flushed, “Bruce, I think maybe it’s you who needs to make the decision as to whether or not we should still be together. I’ll be honest, if you told me that you had feelings for another woman then ran into one of your exes like that…”

“You never lied to me,” he told her. “I’d be lying if I said it didn’t bother me that you kissed Queen but you didn’t try to hide it. I still love you, I still want us to be together and, you said it yourself, you love him but you’re in love with me. We both have a lot to get past here, I know that, and maybe your dad has a point about waiting six months, but at the end of that six months I still want you to be my wife.”

“I don’t know why you put up with me, I really don’t,” she said, feeling guilt wash over her as she heard the pain in his voice.

“Same reason you put up with me; I love you,” he said softly. “Do I wish Queen would just go away and not be a part of our lives ever again? Yes, but I love you more than I hate him. That doesn’t mean I’m not beating the shit out of him when I get home though.” She snorted and heard his answering chuckle on the other end. She heard the draw of his breath before he spoke, “I hurt you, I get that, but I’m trying,” he told her. “I’m trying to do better by you so don’t give up on me yet.”

“I won’t,” she promised. “I’ll be honest though, I’m not ready to commit to a wedding or a media blitz right now, not until I sort a few things out in my head.”

“I wish I could tell you that we could find a way around that,” he said ruefully. “If I could, I’d shield you from it but being in the public spotlight goes along with being a Wayne. Even if we just dated or
lived together the paparazzi be out in droves. At least with an engagement announcement and planned media strategy we can get ahead of it and control the flow of information.”

“Lucius Fox is my dad, remember? I understand that dealing with the press is a fact of life,” she told him. “I knew from the minute you said you wanted to make this official that it meant going public.”

“Is that…is that one of the reasons you’re having second thoughts about us?”

“I’m not having second thoughts about us, just about getting married too quickly,” she reassured him. “It’s just a lot to take in and I don’t want to rush things. I know you want everything now but I can’t give that to you. I need time to heal and find my footing, okay? That night terror last night kind of brought that home to me in a big way and until I get past this, I can’t move on.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “Do you want me to talk to your dad again?”

“No, I’ll handle it,” she took a deep breath, “Just to clarify, I’m not saying I want to break up or not marry you, I’m saying that we need to slow down and you need to stop taking charge of my life like this. I’m not a member of your team or your subordinate, Bruce; you can’t issue orders and expect me to just do as you tell me to.”

“I didn’t mean to do that,” he said in a pained voice. “When I offered to train you and bring you into my team—”

“I know, I know what you meant and I appreciate the offer, but I don’t think working for you is the best option for me right now. We’ll talk when you get back and figure it out together, okay?” She leaned back against the armrest and closed her eyes, “As for my dad, I’ll let him know that I don’t appreciate him making all those plans without my having some input.”

“I hate to tell you, Baby, but he’s not wrong,” he said reluctantly. “I told him we just wanted a cake and a quick thing at the manor but he raised some very valid points and you should be protected legally.”

“If I thought I needed a lawyer, I’d hire one,” she told him. “In fact, I already have one living with me so we’re good. If you want a pre-nup or whatever, fine, but my dad needs to stay out of it and let us settle into this relationship before we start sending out press releases.”

“Okay,” he said, his tone warming. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she said with a soft smile.

“I’ll call you later,” he promised. “Bye Baby; be safe.”

“You, too. Goodbye.”

“Hey,” Laurel said with a yawn as she came stumbling into the living room in a pair of men’s style flannel pajamas just as Bruce ended the call. “Who was on the phone?”

“Morning,” Renee said trailing after her in a pair of Dick’s boxer briefs and a V-neck t-shirt.

“Bruce,” she told her. She looked at Laurel guiltily, “Listen, there’s something I need to tell you…”

“You had sex with Oliver last night?” She asked off-handedly.

“No, of course not!” She flushed.

“You did something with him last night,” she snorted, plopping down on the other end of the couch.
“Scoot over and don’t Bogart the blanket,” Renee said getting between them and draping the bottom half of the covers over her legs.

“He kissed me,” she admitted reluctantly. “Along with some other stuff.”

“Other stuff?” Renee repeated with an arched eyebrow.

“Nothing sexual,” she said wryly then paused, “Well, slightly sexual but mostly we just yelled a lot.”

“Look, I told you that I’m done with Oliver,” Laurel assured her. “That said, and not to sound bitter, but if you do get together with him then just watch yourself, okay? Nothing against him, but…”

“No, I get it,” she told her. “He needs to get his life together before he can be with anyone, I said the same thing to him last night in fact.”

Laurel looked at her curiously, “But he did ask you to come home with him, right?”

“He asked for a little more than that actually, but I’m already with someone,” she told her.

“Oh please tell me it’s not that stone cold bitch you were with at the bar last night,” Renee said flatly.

“Isabel?” She squeaked, “No! No, she’s actually who we’re investigating.”

“Good!” Renee breathed, “I’m telling you, that woman gave off major vibe, know what I mean? She had the crazy eyes.”

“I said the same exact thing!” Laurel said triumphantly.

Renee gave her an approving look, “Like I said, beauty and brains.”

Laurel looked at her and shook her head, “You know what, suddenly I’m starting to see what my sister has been talking about.”

“Why, what’s she been talking about?” Renee asked curiously as she noticed the grins the two women were exchanging.

“Sara is bi and keeps trying to convince us that dating women is a hell of a lot easier than dating men,” Felicity told her.

“Oh!” Renee said with a wide grin, “Well, while I agree with the sentiment in principle, I’m afraid that dating women has its own fair share of problems, believe me. For instance, doubling up on PMS once a month ain’t exactly pretty.”

“Trust me, men get PMS,” Laurel snorted. “I don’t know what it’s called but men can get just as pissy and hormonal as women only it’s pretty much all the time and not just once every twenty-eight days.”

“My ears are burning,” Dick said coming down the stairs and heading towards them.

“Mine too,” Luke said with a yawn as he rubbed the back of his neck. He plopped on the chaise not occupied by Dick and glanced out the window. “Snow’s stopped.”

“Yeah, it stopped a little before five,” Felicity told him.

“What time did you get up?” Laurel asked with a frown.
“Around three,” she said quietly.

“You okay?” Dick asked her nodding at her wrist.

Felicity picked up her now empty cup of herbs, “I will be.”


Before Dick could answer, Felicity cut in, “I had kind of a sparring accident yesterday and took a nasty fall last night so Dick patched me up.”

“Are you okay?” He asked in concern.

“Fine,” she said, flashing her Band-Aid. “Just a few bruises and broke a nail.”

“Those are fingertip bruises,” Renee said from beside her.

“I reached out and grabbed her arm so she wouldn’t take a nasty tumble but she wound up wiping us both out,” Dick cut in smoothly. “I’m surprised you didn’t hear us shouting last night. I’ll be honest, I totally screamed like a girl on my way down.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Luke snorted then gave Dick an apologetic look, “I mean about Baby doing a wipe-out, not about you screaming like a girl.”

“I heard something,” Renee said, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Personally, I just thought Blondie here was getting it on with the Boy Wonder last night. Especially since they were calling out each other’s names and I could have sworn I heard some heavy breathing going on.”

“What’s that?” Oliver said sharply as he entered the room. Late to the party as always, Felicity thought.

“Oh! Are you guys together?” Laurel said with a bright grin and tossing Felicity an approving look. “Dick’s the guy you were just talking about?”

“Oh no,” Dick laughed nervously.

“No!” Felicity said quickly. “We’re,” she gestured between them and shook her head, “No.”

“Then why was he in your room for like half an hour or more and why did I hear you ask if she wanted you to spend the night?” Renee asked Dick with a wicked gleam in her eye. “Oh, and I could’ve sworn I heard you say something about ‘bondage’.”

“What were you doing; listening at the goddamn door?” Dick asked incredulously.

Oliver’s expression was thunderous as Luke turned a baleful eye towards Dick, “Wait, you hooked up with my sister last night?”

Maybe it was the lack of sleep, or maybe it was just because she had the sudden urge to get some payback for Barbara, but Felicity decided to just roll with it, “It’s okay, honey bunny,” she said getting up off the couch to plop down on Dick’s lap and wrap her arms around his neck, “I’m tired of hiding our love, aren’t you?”

“Whoa!” Dick said wide-eyed, throwing up his arms. “No, no, no!” He looked over to the black expressions on the other two men’s faces, “She’s kidding! Ba—er, Felicity, tell them you’re just kidding.”
“Oh, so you didn’t ‘bond’ with me on the bathroom counter last night then offer to take it to the bed so you could keep me company afterwards?” She said with a naughty smirk.

“That’s pretty much word for word what I heard,” Renee said smoothly.

“That is…she’s taking that completely out of context,” Dick said defensively.

“So you did have sex with my baby sister?” Luke growled.

“No, he didn’t,” Oliver bit out, giving Felicity a thunderous glare.

“How do you know?” Felicity asked, batting her eyelashes in his direction while Renee and Laurel began snickering on the couch.

“Yeah,” Luke said slowly as he turned towards Oliver who was sitting on the other couch closest to him, “How do you know?

“This is not funny,” Dick told her flatly. “If I get my ass kicked over this…”

“What’s the matter, Boy Wonder?” Renee cackled, “Don’t you think it’s about time you expanded your horizons and tried breaking up the string of redheads with a blonde?”

“Not when the blonde in question is engaged to Bruce,” he told her, removing Felicity from his lap. “Who will hurt me if he sees this so I suggest you wipe the feeds before he gets home because we both know the whole place is wired.”

“Spoilsport,” she told him as she walked back over to sit next to Renee. “Besides, I turned off all the cameras; especially the pervy ones in the bedrooms.”

“Bruce has pervy cameras in the bedrooms?” Luke asked, suddenly distracted again.

“More importantly, you’re engaged to Bruce Wayne?” Laurel said in surprise.

Renee hitched her thumb towards Laurel, “What she said.”

The other woman shook her head in amazement, “Wow, now I can’t decide if you’re mask catnip or billionaire catnip because this is like, what, your third one?”

“You’ve dated three billionaires?” Renee asked, “Damn, talk about a high-roller.”

“Daniel doesn’t count,” Felicity said automatically.

“Daniel?” Dick asked with a scowl.

“Yeah, who the hell is Daniel?” Luke asked.

“How many billionaires do you know anyway?” Renee asked her.

“Lots,” Laurel answered for her, “but the real question you should be asking is how many billionaire *vigilantes* does she know.”

“Daniel is a vigilante?” Renee said in surprise.

“He’s also an asshole,” Oliver muttered.

“Daniel who?” Dick asked again, his eyebrows pulling together.
“Yeah, Daniel who and how come I don’t already know about this?” Luke demanded.

“Garret,” Oliver said flatly. “And the reason you don’t know about him is because I kicked his ass and sent him packing when I found out he was trying to use Felicity to get inside our systems in the Lair in order to suss me out.”

“Lair,” Renee snickered.

“Oliver!” Felicity scowled. “Since when do we go around blurting out people’s civilian identities?”

“Like you said, Daniel doesn’t count,” he said dismissively.

“You kicked his ass for that?” Luke said dubiously.

“Broke his nose and put him through the fucking wall,” Oliver said grimly.

“Yeah, in the middle of our first and only date which happened to be at a three star restaurant, causing several thousands of dollars’ worth of damage!” Felicity snapped.

“We’ve been through this already,” he said in a mildly bored tone.

“Well since this trail of destruction kick of yours has moved from restaurants to places I happen to live, I thought I’d mention it,” she said in a tone that was heavily-laden with sarcasm, “I still can’t believe that you would just casually blurt out another mask’s identity in a room full of people!”

“If Garret wanted to keep his identity under wraps he shouldn’t have targeted you like that,” he told her.

“Wait; Daniel Garret, the guy with the movie, is a mask?” Luke said furrowing his brow in disbelief. “What’s his handle?”


“Wait, but that’s the title of--”

“Yeah,” Oliver said, cutting him off. “Like I said, the guy’s an egomaniacal asshat.”

“Takes one to know one,” Felicity muttered ignoring Oliver’s rebuking gaze.

“You kicked his ass, huh?” Luke said, looking mildly impressed. “Okay, well, maybe I won’t beat you to a bloody pulp today after all.”

“I appreciate that,” Oliver said wryly.

“So answer the question,” Renee told her.

“Which one?” Laurel snorted.

“How many billionaire vigilantes do you know?”

Felicity opened her mouth to speak then paused, “Um, technically,” she ran through all of the names in her mind, “Billionaires, billionaire adjacent, or just millionaires? And is it just vigilantes or possible bad guys, too? Also, is it okay if they’re dead as long as I technically knew them at some point?”

“The fact that you even have to qualify that intrigues me,” Renee said dryly. “All of the above.”
“Fifteen,” she told her, “more or less but probably more. Oh wait, make that eighteen but don’t hold me to that because I might think of a few more later.”

All of them turned to look at her in surprise.

“Eighteen?” Oliver said in a perturbed manner, his expression reflected in the faces of the other two men in the room.

“Don’t worry, you guys are on the list, too,” she said off-handedly.

“Who else is on the list?” Dick asked.

“That would be telling,” she told him in a very serious tone.


“Nope,” she said popping the ‘p’.

“How many vigilantes do you know altogether?” Laurel asked her.

“Um, personally or just by reputation?” She asked slowly.

“Mask catnip, I rest my case,” Laurel said, tipping an imaginary hat in her direction.

“There is no way you know eighteen millionaire and above vigilantes,” Oliver said laconically.

“And villains,” Renee pointed out.

“Still, there’s no way,” Dick said, agreeing with Oliver.

“You, Thea, Bruce, Dick, Luke, Tam, Tim, Dad, Daniel, Dr. Harrison Wells who isn’t exactly a vigilante but funds Barry’s mission so he counts, Daniel, Ray—”

“Ray doesn’t count,” Oliver interjected.

“He counts,” Felicity told him.


“The Atom,” Felicity told her.

“The shrinking guy? I’ve heard of him, why wouldn’t he count?” She asked.

“Ollie doesn’t like him because he joined up with Daniel Garret and tried to convince Isabel Rochev to sell them QC’s Applied Sciences Division out from under him after he attacked him at the restaurant and he had to scramble to put the kibosh on it,” Laurel told her. “Plus, he hit on Felicity. Actually, both of them did hence Ollie kicking Garret’s ass at said restaurant.” She looked at Felicity, “How much property damage did they do again?”

“I think it was a little over ten thousand,” Felicity told her, “but Daniel had to write a check for one hundred thousand to cover Table Salt’s losses while they did the repairs so they wouldn’t press charges and he wouldn’t get sued.”

“Hey, I chipped in for half,” Oliver muttered darkly.

She ignored him, “But, for the record, Ray never hit on me.”
“He totally did,” Laurel said. “You just didn’t notice because Ray was more of a Barry kind of guy whereas Daniel was totally Ollie and everyone knows you have a type.”

“I do not!”

“You totally do,” the other woman told her.

“What’s her type?” Renee asked with a grin.

“Brooding billionaire vigilante bad boy asshole,” Laurel told her, “At least that’s what Sara says.” She turned to Oliver, “No offense.”

Oliver didn’t say anything, he just continued to glower. Luke, on the other hand, was grinning from ear to ear, “You know, Baby, she might have a point.”

“Come to think of it…” Dick began only to have Oliver turn a baleful eye in his direction, “I was actually thinking of Bruce,” he said apologetically.

“Okay, we’re up to twelve; who else?” Renee asked.

She searched her mind, “Lex Luthor.”

“Lex Luthor isn’t a vigilante or a villain,” Oliver said dryly, “he’s just a businessman.”

“I say the jury’s out on that one because he gives me a definite shady vibe,” she told him.

Dick nodded, “She’s right, Bruce has been looking into that guy for a while now. He’s never been able to connect him to anything directly but his hands definitely aren’t clean. When did you meet Lex Luthor anyway?”

“At QC a few months ago,” she told him. “Well, I didn’t ‘meet’ him really; we just rode up on the same elevator.”

“He doesn’t count,” Oliver repeated. “Without proof he’s just another businessman with a rep for being ruthless.”

“Did he hit on you?” Laurel asked Felicity.

“Little bit,” she said weakly.

“Counts,” Laurel said.

Oliver scowled, “When did Luthor hit on you?”

“He didn’t really hit on me, per se,” she said scrunching up her nose, “he just kind of stared at me in a weird way. I kept thinking I must have spilled something on my blouse.”

“He stared at your…?” Oliver flicked his eyes down to her chest.

“It’s not like he found much,” she snorted.

“If you’ve got anything, they stare; trust me,” Renee told her dryly. “It gets even worse when you’re a lesbian with D cups because, as you might have heard, all we need to make our lives complete is find the right guy to change us and, of course, watch us while we have sex with other women.”

“Again, to quote my sister, all men have that fantasy,” Laurel said, stifling a yawn.
“Not every guy has that fantasy,” Felicity said. “I mean, I get that a lot of guys do, but not *every* single one of them. Do they?” She looked to the three men occupying the room and noted that all were suddenly silent and refusing to make eye contact.

“I rest my case,” she said in a stage whisper.

“You should have told me that Luthor was being inappropriate,” Oliver grumbled with a slight coloring to his cheeks.

“He was just looking at me funny; what were you going to do to him? Kick his ass for staring at my boobs and being weird?” She asked him.

“Yes,” Luke, Oliver, and Dick all said at the same time.

“Thirteen,” Renee said, “five more to go.”

“Malcolm Merlyn.”

“Fourteen,” Laurel counted off, “although he never hit on you, right?”

“They don’t all have to hit on me,” Felicity said in slight exasperation.

“Did he?” Renee asked.

Felicity paused, “He said I was lovely once.”

“Counts,” Renee and Laurel said together and Oliver’s jaw clenched even tighter, “Fifteen?”

“Nyssa.”

“The Heir to the Demon hit on you?” Renee asked in surprise.

“Totally did,” Laurel said then at Felicity’s glare she shrugged, “Sara told me she had a kind of moment with you during the Blood Army thing.”

“She didn’t hit on me, she just talked to me a little, and I thought this was a list of millionaire and above masks, not the life and loves of Felicity,” she objected.

“Can we help it if it happens to be both?” Renee told her.

“My dad, my sister, and my brother never hit on me,” she said in annoyance.

“Family doesn’t count,” Laurel told her. “At least not in the ‘Mask Catnip’ category of our game.”

“Wait, so Dick and Tim hit on you?” Renee said, turning to the only one of the two currently in the room.

“No,” Dick sputtered.

“Tim falls into the family category. As for Dick, I’m a blonde, remember?”

“That’s true,” Renee nodded solemnly.

“I do not only date redheads,” he said with a scowl.

“That’s good because I’m thinking of changing my hair color,” Felicity said casually. “Barb has been talking about going blonde so I thought about trying out red for a while.”
“Really?” Dick said perking up slightly and giving her a second look. Luke and Oliver both gave him a hard look and he cleared his throat, “I was just thinking that Barbara might look pretty good as a blonde, that’s all.”

“Besides, she’s still shorter than him and he only dates women whose boobs are practically at eye level that way he doesn’t have to strain his neck,” Renee smirked.

“I’m so glad you’re enjoying yourself at my expense over there,” Dick told her.

“I think we’re all enjoying it actually,” Renee said in a mocking tone.

“I know I am,” Laurel mused. “It’s a side effect of clarity; it gives you a whole new appreciation for sarcasm and busting other people’s balls.”

“You noticed that, too?” Renee asked her in surprise.

“I think it comes from having to recite the Serenity prayer every five minutes,” Laurel said seriously. “After a while you just sort of either go loopy or get really, really pissed off.”

“Oh my God, I know what you mean!” The other woman exclaimed. “If I get one more coffee mug or cross stitched pillow emblazoned with the words, ‘God grant me the serenity,’ I’m going to go postal.”

Laurel nodded emphatically, “Yes! Thank you! I mean, I appreciate the support but just stop sending me this shit, you know?”

“What’s the weirdest recovery themed gift you got since rehab?” Renee asked her, getting excited.

Laurel bit her lip, “My mom sent me these twelve teddy bears called ‘Recovery Bears’ and each one represented one of the twelve steps. My favorite was the one that had ‘I Heart Clean Living’ across the front. That or the one that said ‘Serenity Superstar’. I did have one that said ‘I Heart Rehab’ but that one died a horrible death in pottery class when I accidentally threw it in the kiln.”

“Classic,” Renee snickered.

“Aren’t we still missing three names here?” Luke spoke up.

“Oh, right,” Renee said shaking her head, “Last three names there, hot stuff.”

“Isabel, Miranda, and,” she cleared her throat, “Slade.”

“Wait, Miranda?” Dick asked. “I know who Isabel is but I’d never heard of a ‘Miranda Tate’ until Bruce briefed us yesterday.” Felicity noticed that he didn’t bring up Slade again and neither did anyone else, something she was very grateful for as the whole night had just been one long emotional roller coaster as it was. “He also said they could hardly find anything on her other than some incorporation documents and her charity front.”

“I don’t know a lot about her either,” she admitted. “All I know is that she’s got a big hate-on for Ra’s al Ghul in particular.”

“Do you know why?” Oliver asked, his body tensing as he instantly went from a guy sitting on the couch in a pair of flannel lounge pants to the Arrow.

“She said that he ordered the deaths of her entire family including her siblings and her children,” she told them. “I’m sure she was holding something back but my read is that she really believes he’s
responsible for their deaths.”

“What else do you know? Is she American? Married? What were his reasons for going after her family in the first place?” Dick asked her.

“I don’t know, she didn’t say. She sounds American but she could be Canadian or just have lost her accent and I’m not sure what her country of origin is,” Felicity said before turning to Laurel. “Did she say anything to you about her past?”

“I never met her,” the other woman admitted. “Isabel was the one who contacted me.”

“Which begs the question, why the hell would you talk to Isabel Rochev and join a vigilante outfit without contacting me first?” Oliver asked harshly as he turned a stern eye toward Laurel.

“I’m sorry, Ollie,” Laurel said with a frown and an arched eyebrow, “I didn’t realize I had to run everything I did past you first, especially since A) we’re no longer dating and B) none of my tattoos actually contain the words ‘Property of Oliver Queen’.”

“You have tattoos?” Renee asked, her interest obviously peaked.

“Seven,” Laurel nodded.
Felicity felt her jaw drop, totally forgetting about Oliver’s building temper tantrum for the moment, “Seven?” She said incredulously.

“Yes,” the other woman nodded. “Angel wings on my back that have the words ‘She Flies With Her Own Wings’ in Latin, a word ring around my ankle that says ‘Love Thyself, Know Thyself, Be Thyself’, three stars on my foot representing me, Sara, and my mom, my grandma Evelyn’s birthdate on my hip…”

“My mom’s name was Evelyn,” she told her in wide-eyed wonder.

Laurel, conservative, always perfect Laurel was a tatted up bad ass.

Un-fucking-believable.

“Really?” She said in surprise.


“The artist?” Laurel said, looking mildly impressed, “Wow,” she paused. “Where was I? Oh,” she then lifted her shirt slightly so they could both see the fairly fresh ink, “and I just got an Autism Awareness ribbon on my stomach for my little cousin and a tattoo on each wrist.”

She held out both wrists and the women beside her on the couch both craned their necks to see them.

“I Got You,” Renee read out-loud then looked at the other one, “We Got Each Other.”

“I wanted something to remind me that I’m stronger than my addiction so, this way, if I ever do pick up a drink or pills again, I can see the tattoos on my wrist and remember what I had to go through to get sober and how I survived,” she told them.

“Wow,” Felicity said in amazement.

“So you’re some kind of a bad girl but with a social conscience,” Renee said, her grin brightening, “Okay, I’m…I’m totally in love. Are you absolutely sure you’re straight?”
Laurel gave her a flirtatious half-smile, “Well, I did go to college…”

“Marry me,” Renee said causing Laurel to crack up.

“Okay, if you three are done having your little girl talk, I’d like an answer to my question,” Oliver growled.

All three woman threw less than happy looks in his direction.

“I gave you an answer, *Oliver*,” Laurel said emphasizing his full given name. “It’s my life, my decision, and none of your business.”

“How do you figure?” He demanded, “You knew Isabel Rochev was my business partner and you didn’t think to call me first before moving out here?”

“No, because believe it or not, you really don’t occupy my every waking thought these days,” she told him with a darkening expression. “I did however know Sara was with Orbital which is how I knew it was a legitimate offer.”

“Do you even know how much danger you put yourself in?” Oliver asked her. “This type of reckless and impulsive behavior is what got you sent to rehab in the first place!” He burst out, “What were you thinking? All you had to do was pick up the damn phone!”

The other woman scowled, “Excuse me?”

“Hold on,” Felicity told him, her own anger coming to the forefront, “First off, *Ollie*,” Oliver’s head whipped around to look at her in shock as she used his nickname, “you are a guest in our home, mine and Laurel’s! In fact, you are an unwelcome guest in our home, so before you go jumping all over Laurel for her decisions maybe you should start looking at a few of your own recent escapades then rewind that judgment I’m hearing in your tone, mister, or you can pack up your stuff and get out!”

Laurel and Oliver both looked at her in stunned silence while Renee and Dick just looked impressed and Luke snickered.

“Oh yeah, here comes the Loud Voice,” her brother chuckled. “Your ass is toast.”

“As for you,” she said, leveling a baleful eye at Luke and causing his grin to abruptly vanish, “don’t think for a second that I’ve forgotten about you bursting into my house last night or the fact that I promised to tell Peggy Ann about it.”

“Who’s Peggy Ann?” Renee whispered to Laurel who shrugged in confusion.

“The Chinese grandmother,” Dick offered from off to the side.

“You guys have a Chinese grandmother?” Renee said in disbelief.

“And you,” Felicity said, pointing an accusing finger at Dick.

“Me?” He said in surprise.

“You called Bruce this morning to tattle on me,” she said with a scowl.

“I did not,” he frowned. “I was just concerned about--”

“You told Bruce about me shooting that guy and running the other two over, you told him I kept
guns in my apartment, and you told him about…’ she paused, ‘that other stuff we talked about.’

‘Hey, he told me that you already told him a lot of that stuff already!’ He said defensively.

‘Exactly!’ Felicity said, ‘#I told Bruce because he’s my fiancé and it’s our business.’

‘Wayne isn’t your fiancé because you aren’t marrying him, remember?’ Oliver bit out, shaken from his Loud Voice induced stupor.


‘Shut it!’ Felicity snapped at the two of them before turning back to Dick, ‘I would have told Bruce everything on my own and in my own time.’

‘Really?’ Dick said skeptically, ‘You would have told him that you keep unsecured weapons in the nightstand next to the bed?’

‘Yes,’ she said without skipping a beat.

‘Because you and I both know that Bruce would never let you have a gun,’ Dick said with a slightly patronizing tone.

‘Wait, ‘let’ her have a gun?’ Laurel asked sharply. ‘And who the hell does he think he is telling her what she can and can’t have in her own apartment?’

‘I’m a bit curious over that one myself,’ Renee said, showing her solidarity. By that point it was the girls against the boys and the boys weren’t doing so hot.

‘Technically, it’s Bruce’s apartment,’ he told her, completely unperturbed.

‘I’m sorry,’ Laurel held up one finger and turned to Felicity, ‘Do you have a lease?’

‘Yes, I do,’ she told her. ‘A really, really good lease that says that Bruce has absolutely no right to even step inside of this place without an invitation as long as I’m the legal occupant plus it’s open-ended so I can stay here forever if I want to.’

‘It’s Felicity’s apartment,’ Laurel told him.

‘Nice try, but I happen to own a few apartment complexes myself and I know that Bruce would have put a no weapons clause in his leasing contract,’ Dick said smugly.

‘Is that true?’ Laurel asked her.

‘Nope,’ Felicity said watching the look of confusion register on Dick’s face. ‘Plus, he agreed to pay all my expenses and redecorate the place and it’s all in writing. I can show it to you but, I promise, there’s not a damn thing in it that says I can’t exercise my constitutional rights to own a legally licensed and registered firearm.’

‘Lawyered!’ Renee crowed.

‘Then why did he tell me this morning to get all of the guns and take them back to the manor to have them locked in the safe?’ He demanded.

‘Yeah, he mentioned that, too,’ Felicity told him.

‘And?’ He prompted.
“I told him ‘no’, and he dropped it,” she said simply.

Dick’s mouth fell open slightly, “You…told Bruce ‘no’ and he just let it go? Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Felicity said with narrowed eyes, “And then he apologized and promised to do better next time.”

“Fiancée’d!” Renee cackled again, wiping the corners of her eyes where tears of mirth were beginning to gather. “I love it!”

“The way I see it,” Felicity said, sweeping her eyes over all three men who were now stewing in their own juices, “the three of you need to go take your showers and get dressed so that you can go have breakfast and discuss among yourselves why it is that, even though you all seem to think you know everything, that all three of you are currently single.” Oliver and Luke opened their mouths to speak but she stopped them, “With the exception of Luke who is sort of involved with Sara, at least until I tell her how he behaved in the home we share,” Luke’s jaw snapped shut, “And Oliver,” she said turning to meet his own cool gaze, “You are very, very single, trust me.”

“We’ll see,” he said quietly.

“As for the three of us,” she said ignoring him, “we have a lot of errands to run after the decorators get here so I suggest that you gentlemen make alternate plans for tonight because you aren’t staying here.”

“All three of us?” Renee asked her.

“Well, Laurel and I have to run some errands but if you wanted to come along, you could,” Felicity offered.

“Hell yeah, why break up the party now?” Renee told her then turned to Laurel. “And maybe Thursday me and you could check out a meeting together. I know a place where the coffee ain’t half bad and someone always brings cronuts.”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Laurel said gratefully as she gave the other woman a brilliant smile.

“You got a sponsor yet?” She asked her.

“No,” Laurel said biting her lip with a slightly bashful expression. “I, uh, just got into town yesterday so I haven’t even looked to see where the meetings are held yet.”

“I could be yours if you want?” Renee offered with a small smile, “I mean, us girl masks should stick together, right?”

“That would be great,” she nodded.

“Cool!” Renee said, “So where are we going today?”

“I have to go grocery shopping and pick up some other stuff, plus return Isabel’s car to the dealership —” Felicity began.

All three men began to speak at once.

“Are you nuts?” Luke asked her.

“You can’t return a car full of bullet holes to the dealership!” Oliver told her.
Dick glowered at her, “Bruce said Alfred was taking care of that!”

“I don’t need anyone else to handle it,” Felicity told them, “I can take care of it all by myself, thank you very much.”

“By taking it to the dealership?” Oliver demanded. “And just how do you intend on explaining that?”

“Orbital leased it,” she told him. “Chances are this probably isn’t the first car they’ve returned with a few bullet holes.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Luke asked her. “You’re going to get thrown in jail if you go driving that thing around town!”

“Plus it’s kind of cold and all the windows are damaged or shattered,” Laurel pointed out with a frown.

“We’ll dress warmly,” she told her.

“I hate to side with the XY half of our little group dynamic, but they’ve kind of got a point about the bullet holes thing,” Renee said reluctantly.

Felicity waved her off, “I’m not having Bruce buy a second car for two hundred thousand dollars when this one has insurance,” she told her. “I’ve got it covered, trust me. By the way,” she asked her, “how good are you with using spray paint?”

“Spray paint?” Renee repeated slowly. “Um…”

The front door rang and Felicity looked up.

“Who the hell is that?” Luke said in confusion. “I thought security had to announce all visitors to the penthouse then accompany them upstairs?”

“Luke, do me a favor and go answer the door,” she told him.

“Why do I have to answer the door?” He asked her.

“Because if it’s a really polite bad guy I might need you to kick his ass,” she said sarcastically.

“It’s probably just Alfred,” Dick said, getting up with him and both of them headed to the door together.

“Felicity, can I talk to you for a minute?” Oliver asked stiffly as he got up from his seat as well.

“I don’t know Oliver; ‘can’ you?” She asked smartly.

He bared his teeth in a mockery of a smile and ground out, “‘May’ I speak with you for a moment?”

“Study?” She said, not waiting for him to answer her as she got out from under the blanket and headed for the office.

“Hey honey!” Wildcat said stopping her as he walked into the room with several bags and two drink trays full of coffee, “I brought that stuff on the list you texted me. I snatched some cans of paint from a couple of taggers I caught looking hard at the wall of my gym last month so there should be plenty.”
“Great!” She told him then pointed towards the kitchen. She looked at Renee and Laurel who had trailed after them into the foyer, “Hey Laurel, pay Wildcat back for this stuff with the cash in my wallet and put on an extra pot of coffee, okay? My bag should still be in the kitchen next to the gun.”

“Gun?” Wildcat repeated with a frown.

“Sure,” Laurel said sidling up to Wildcat. “This way. Ooh, are those bagels?” She asked, peeking in one of the bags he was carrying and taking it from him.

“Yeah, I basically cleaned them out just like you told me.” He handed off the coffee to Renee who followed Laurel into the kitchen. “And honey, don’t worry about paying me back; I got it.”

“Yeah, well, Orbital gave me an expense account; a really, really big one,” she told him.

“In that case, I’ll give you the receipts,” he said with a smirk.

“Go on to the kitchen, we’ll be right there.”

“You got it,” he said, following the rest of them into the kitchen as she and Oliver continued to head for the study.

“Who is that guy?” Oliver asked her in a low voice once they got inside and closed the door behind him. “Your Irish uncle?”

“Actually, he’s another mask who works at Orbital,” she told him. “His handle is Wildcat; I’ll be sure to introduce you.”

“Wildcat?” He asked, “Wildcat Grant? The prizefighter?”

“He’s retired, but yes,” she told him. “Now what is it you need to talk about?”

His posture was tense, “Do you really think you should be inviting Orbital assets into your apartment?”

“Actually he’s Bat Family, so yeah,” she said wryly.

“Bat Family?” He repeated.

“You guys have ‘Team Arrow’, we have ‘Bat Family’.”

“*We* have Team Arrow,” he corrected her with a dark look.

“What do you want to talk about, Oliver?” She asked him with a sigh.

“You know exactly what we need to talk about,” he said with a hint of anger. “You and Laurel are coming back with me to Starling!”

“And I told you I’m not leaving.”

He glowered down at her, “Laurel is in too fragile a state to be working in the field and she definitely does not need to be staying with you or going into Orbital right now.”

“Then talk to Laurel about that,” she told him with a scowl.

He tightened his jaw, “I can’t talk to Laurel about this and you know it!”
Her face flushed in annoyance, “Oliver, you have a hell of a lot of nerve coming in here after what went down between us last night and asking me to intercede on your behalf with your ex!”

“I’m not trying to get back with Laurel, damn it!” He told her, “I’m worried that given your history that she’ll go off the rails and get you both killed!”

“Well, I’m not worried about it,” she told him. “I asked Laurel to stay with me specifically so I could watch her and keep her safe and she won’t break my cover at Orbital.”

“How do you know?” He demanded.

“I don’t,” she told him, “but it’s a risk I’m willing to take!”

“I’m not!” He snapped.

“Good thing it’s none of your goddamn business then, huh?”

“Bullshit it’s not my business!” He returned, “This whole thing with Orbital is about me and Wayne!”

She narrowed her eyes at him, “We don’t know that yet.”

“They’re drawing in both our teams, who the hell else would it be about?” He asked her, “And another thing, why did you call me ‘Ollie’ out there?”

“Because you’re acting like ‘Ollie’,” she told him. “Right now you’re being a total ‘Ollie’ in fact!”

“You’re wrong,” he told her in a dangerous growl, advancing on her until they were nearly touching, “Because ‘Ollie’ wouldn’t give a shit about anything or anyone but himself and he certainly wouldn’t have flown three thousand miles to tell a woman he loves her then ask her to marry him.”

“But he would push her out of his life over and over again only to reel her back in the *second* another man decided to claim what he threw away,” she told him coldly.

“I told you I’m not running this time,” he said angrily.

“And what you don’t seem to understand is that actions speak louder than words.”

His lip quirked upwards, “Do you want me to take some action, Felicity?” He said in a seductive timbre, purposefully drawing out the syllables of her name.

“I’m with Bruce,” she told him, steeling her resolve.

Last night she was fresh off a night terror and vulnerable but after her talk with Bruce she was beginning to get her old confidence back. Even though she wasn’t sure about things between them, she felt a little better. She suspected it had to do more with the fact that she finally talked about that night to someone else, even if it wasn’t a lot. That and her newfound friendships with Laurel and Renee really helped lift some of the burden she’d been carrying for a while now.

“You love me,” he told her.

She nodded, “I do, but I’m not going back to Starling.”

He cupped her cheek with his hand and ran his thumb across her cheekbone, “Felicity…”

“No,” she said firmly, reaching up to pull his hand from her face. “I told you, I made a commitment;
I’m not throwing it away, Oliver. I’m sorry.”

“Do you really think you can marry him after this morning?” He asked her with a tender look. His voice dropped to a soft rumble and he inched closer, “I could have taken you right then and there if I wanted to; don’t even bother to deny it,” he warned her. “I felt how wet you were for me, remember?”

She felt the breath catch in her throat but still she pressed on, “I’m not denying I love you or that I’m attracted to you, or even that I still want you, Oliver.”

“Then why are you being so damned stubborn?” He asked her, his hand finding her shoulder and running down her arm before finding the curve of her hip and pulling her closer. “You know I love you, I know you love me--!”

“I love Bruce, too,” she said, pushing his hand away again.

“He’s your past, I’m your future,” he told her, his eyes darkening as they ran over her face. “You can try to deny it all you want but you know it’s true.”

“You need to leave,” she told him, refusing to answer.

“I’m not leaving unless you’re coming with me.”

“Well you’re not staying in my apartment,” she told him, moving past him and heading for the door.

“What do you think is going to happen when you tell Wayne that you kissed me this morning?” He asked her, causing her to falter mid-step. “How do you think he’ll handle it when you tell him that we nearly wound up making love in his alternate Lair and that you wanted me just as much as I wanted you because I know you well enough to know that a secret like that is going to eat you alive and Wayne isn’t the kind of guy who likes to share.”

“Are you threatening me?” She asked, turning slowly toward him.

His face darkened in anger, “You know goddamn well that I would never threaten you!”

“What was all of that supposed to be about then?” She asked him, crossing her arms and tilting her head at him. “Hmm? It kind of sounded like blackmail to me.”

“If you don’t want to tell Wayne then he won’t hear it from me,” he told her, his tone taking on a dangerous edge. “But you don’t lie, Felicity. You might shade the truth or omit the facts, but you never lie, at least not to me. If you can lie to him though then maybe you should think about why that is.”

“I haven’t lied to Bruce about anything,” she told him.

He arched his eyebrow, “Really? So you’re just going to tell him that you and I--?”

“I already did,” she said cutting him off, “First thing this morning, in fact.” As his expression hardened she continued, “Every bit of it including the fact that I still love you but I made it clear that I was still with him and he made it equally clear that he wanted us to be together. I also told him that I wasn’t happy with what he said to you and Luke and that I wouldn’t be bulldozed into doing anything I wasn’t ready for and he promised me he’d do better.” She stepped towards him, her eyes hard. “You asked me why I would pick Bruce, well that’s why, Oliver; because he may make mistakes, he may be a real son of a bitch sometimes, but he knows it and he’ll always try to do better when it comes to our relationship even if I sometimes have to kick his ass to get him to that point.
You want some friendly advice?” She asked coolly, “Take a lesson from Bruce and start doing better.” She gave him one last look before turning on her heel and heading to the door.

“You want me to show you I can do better?” He asked just as her hand touched the door handle, “Well, just you wait and see what I can do because I’m not giving up on us either.”

“And like I told you before, ‘Ollie’,” she said, using his nickname again knowing it would piss him off royally, “Actions speak louder than words.” She glanced at him over her shoulder and noted the high color in his cheeks, “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go eat a bagel.”

“After you…Baby,” he said with a slight smirk, his eyes conveying the message he didn’t need to say out loud in order for her to understand.

Game on.

Chapter End Notes

Again, sorry for the delay. I'm breaking my 'no notes' rule again to offer you all a challenge. I've had a lot of people ask me about songs so I came up with a game. I like this game because I'm always looking for new music and I like my stories to be interactive. Eilowyn, the lovely woman who contributed our cover art (please go look at it in Chapter One if you haven't seen it yet), suggested we have our own soundtrack. I've been taking suggestions, came up with a few of my own, and made a list. Now, this is a HUGE story, the beginning of a possible series (cross your fingers that I make it that far), so there is plenty of room for songs. The challenge is to write in the comments the songs you'd choose, which scenes you'd place them, and why. It can even be for scenes you haven't seen yet but would like to. One person even submitted one she said would be for the movie trailer. Again, this story belongs to you guys and your choices could affect the tone of certain scenes...plus it's just fun. Now here are some of the songs submitted as well as my own. A few of these are in the story being played in the background like in the club or the bar and one song, the kd lang cover of Ella Fitzgerald's Angel Eyes is for a scene near the end (consider it a clue) but the rest of the songs are in no particular order. You can submit your own songs or pick one from the list and tell us where it goes.

1. Do I Wanna Know by the Arctic Monkeys
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qkrhx9pULY

2. Tonight by Mark Balet
http://www.djbooth.net/index/tracks/review/mark-balet-tonight#!bH2DL6

3. Bridges by The Broods
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pr7Eu8a46mw

4. Wake Alone by Hugo
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-b1FZU1Z_s

5. Hey I Don’t Know by Kongos
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClQjqXhKdN4
6. Anywhere But Here by SafetySuit  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzdPeMQSPqM

7. Open Your Eyes by Bea Miller  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bx8O62Tuzno

8. Down by SafetySuit  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHo0Y7Lm9Q4

9. Oblivion by Bastille  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZYisBWNtO0

10. Broken Ones by Jacquie Lee  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgCux7ZnoR8

11. Run by Jasmine Thompson  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnh3xu16cCA

12. Gold by Sir Sly  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5_47eLxb8o

13. Get Hurt by The Gaslight Anthem  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_TI14Z5NNQ

14. Next Girl by The Black Keys  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_PrT25o8Vs

15. Heaven Knows by The Pretty Reckless  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHBxJCq99jA

16. Break the Fall by Laura Welsh  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpp55Iyq4L0

17. Death of Communication by Company of Thieves  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYTYWKghs1Y

18. Girlfriend by Icona Pop  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5_5s5jCYUg

19. Die Tonight Live Forever by InnerPartySystem  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eU1DniTu8NU

20. Hear Your Heart by James Bay  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pp2oPSHJvog

21. Let It Go by James Bay  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SWJSLSuhr8

22. Just Breathe by Mecca Kalani  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efwyP-AcRc8

23. Temperature by Sean Paul  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dW2MmuA1nI4

24. Poet by Jen Foster
https://songspace.com/jenfoster/song/poet

25. Take Me To Church By Hozier
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYSVMgRr6pw

26. When I Get Up by Tegan and Sara
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMZOoTz8osE

27. Coattails by The Broods
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rNsodyWqPY

28. Angel Eyes by kd lang
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgNgZ8oYPs8

29. Stay With Me by Sam Smith
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB-5XG-DbAA

30. In Your Shoes by Sarah McLachlan
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wh1ZJ8OYpLQ

31. Black Widow By Iggy Azalea with Rita Ora (Vice Remix)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9mZ4o6rojo

32. Work Song by Hozier
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkL6wR0xghA

33. Help, I’m Alive by Metric
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxciqGUxV8U

34. Feel Me by Mecca Kalani
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIlhwm8NF_6U#t=24

Also, here's an apology for the delay:

Have fun!---Jen
I know it took a while but's a big one, 107 pages. Hope that makes up for the wait. Enjoy!
I already know everything about the famous "Wearliff" and I can say with absolute confidence that we've got nothing in common.

I'm never gonna put on a rug costume and punch people in the face.

Hell, I haven't been in a fight since the eighth grade!
Chapter Fifty-Three

“So how old are you anyway?” Renee asked as she licked the cream cheese off her fingers.

They were all sitting around the kitchen table drinking coffee and eating the food Wildcat brought over. There were a few dozen bagels, various rolls, croissants, and muffins, as well as several containers of flavored and plain cream cheeses, jam, butter, and a large container of lox. Laurel was on her fourth bagel having found what she announced to be ‘carb nirvana’ while Felicity picked at one of the leftover Tre Colore salads as they had devoured everything else they’d ordered from Aparo’s the night before. While she was a big lover of things with holes in the middle (doughnuts, bagels, lifesavers, those little peach flavored gummy candies that were always two for ninety-nine cents at the grocery store) the salad at least had the advantage of being healthy. Plus, the night terror and drama of that morning was affecting her appetite and, even though she felt a little better after
speaking with Bruce, she still felt horribly guilty for letting things get as far as they did with Oliver. Speaking of whom…

Oliver was now planted firmly at her table right across from her as he munched on a toasted poppy seed bagel like he belonged there. His eyes caught hers and he bit into his bagel with a smirk as if he were reading her mind and knew exactly how much his presence was bothering her.

“How old do I look?” Wildcat asked with a grin as he bit into his own potato bagel that was piled high with smoked salmon and cream cheese with chives.

“At a guess I’d say maybe forty-five or fifty but since I heard a rumor that you’re immortal I’d say that was probably wrong,” she told him.

“You’re immortal?” Oliver asked in surprise.

“Yep, pretty much,” Wildcat told him. “And to answer your question, sweetheart, I turned a hundred and six last year.”

Even Felicity stopped at that one. “I thought you were in your eighties?”

“Nuh uh,” he told her. “I was born September 12, 1910.”

Oliver put down the bagel, “Are you a meta-human?”

“Nope,” he told him. “I was just a normal guy until I had a curse put on me then a sorcerer I knew tried to counter-act it and I wound up slightly immortal.”

“Sorcerer?” Oliver said dubiously.

Renee’s expression matched the other man’s, “And what does ‘slightly immortal’ mean?”

“Back when I was with the JSA,” he paused, “You guys ever hear of them?”

“No,” Oliver said with a frown.

“You want to take it, honey?” Wildcat asked turning to Felicity causing a perturbed look to cross Oliver’s expression and, from the grin on Ted’s face, the other man knew it.

“The Justice Society of America was a secret organization formed to combat a Nazi threat calling itself The Fourth Reich,” Felicity explained. “President Franklin Roosevelt was given intel that Hitler had acquired a weapon called ‘The Spear of Destiny’—”

“Wait, *the* Spear of Destiny?” Renee asked dumbstruck, “As in the spear that pierced the side of Jesus?”

“That’s the one,” Wildcat told her. “Old Adolf and his buddies were into everything from mystical objects to creatin’ super soldiers so the JSA was formed to stop ‘em.”

“Super soldiers?” Oliver asked, his jaw tightening as he looked at the older man. “Have you ever heard of a serum called ‘Mirakuru’?”

“Naw, but all that was probably before my time,” he told him. “I didn’t join the JSA until it was reformed back in World War II. It was disbanded briefly after a bunch of asshole politicians wanted to force the members of the team to reveal their identities to the public so they all quit.”

“Actually, that would be the right time-frame,” he told him. “It was a super soldier serum developed
by Japanese scientists during the war.”

He shook his head, “I don’t know anything about that; not by that name anyway. The Nazis and the Japanese were doing all kinds of stuff, mostly the Nazis. I was just a regular guy back then, no abilities or anything, so I left the magical crap to the guys like Dr. Fate and Zatara and stuck to flying planes and punchin’ people out.”

“So you’re telling us that magic is real?” Renee said incredulously.

“Magic, aliens, demons, alternate universes, time travel, the whole nine yards,” he said off-handedly. “We even had a bunch of folks with super powers on the team long before this meta-human shit ever hit the papers including our own version of that Superman guy from Metropolis.” He grinned, “Course, ours was from some kind of alternate Earth thing and was quite a bit older than that kid in the cape so it might not even be the same guy. I kinda thought that Lois Lane’s article was pretty interesting though; either they got a lot in common or she hacked into the old JSA files and made it all up.”

“Wait, so you guys had a Superman and he really was an alien?” Luke asked.

“Sure was,” Wildcat told him. “Kal-El was a real stand-up guy, too. He took off after his wife died, poor bastard. Coincidentally, she was named ‘Lois’, as well; she was killed in a tussle with one of our bad guys. It was a damn shame; the sick freak hit her over the head and she fell into a coma then died a few days afterwards. He blamed himself for not bein’ there to save her while we were off fightin’ and took off right after the funeral never to be seen or heard from again. He said he couldn’t stay on Earth anymore, the guilt ate him up so bad it about damn near destroyed him. I always hoped, wherever it was he went to, he found some kind of peace.” He sighed, “Anyway, he wasn’t the only alien we met either. Let me tell you, workin’ with the JSA was a real eye-opener.”

“His name was Kal-El?” Luke asked, obviously intrigued. “What planet was he from?”

“Same as what Lois Lane wrote; a place called Krypton,” he told him. “He told me all about it once. His planet was torn apart somehow and his parents sent him to Earth in some kind of pod when he was a baby in order to save his life.”

Luke rubbed his chin and narrowed his eyes in confusion, “Okay, but if he’s from another planet then why does he look human?”

“How can you tell?” Dick asked him. “All you can ever see in the pictures is a blur because he’s moving so fast.”

“Like I said, I don’t know about this new guy but, according to Kal, there’s lots of aliens that look like us,” Wildcat said before taking another sip of his coffee. “In fact, accordin’ to what he and a few other folks told me, there’s always been aliens here and our ancestors just thought they was gods or somethin’; that’s why his folks sent him here to begin with.”


“That and because the plan was to have him grow up and rule the human race so he could recreate a new Krypton or some such.” At the startled looks on the faces of his companions, Wildcat chuckled, “Relax! Kal was a pussycat; no matter what his daddy’s plans were he wasn’t going for it. He was just this sweet, humble guy from Smallville, Kansas who was raised by a farmer and his wife. His idea of gettin’ rowdy was stickin’ a slice of cheddar on his apple pie.” He grimaced, “Only way he’d eat it, too. I took him to my favorite diner and tried getting’ him to eat it with ice cream or whipped cream, anything but cheese, but he told me that he liked every kind of pie but apple because it always
smelled better than it tasted and needed the cheddar on it just to make it worth eatin’.”

“That’s kind of true,” Dick said with a frown. “Not about the cheddar but about how apple pie smells a lot better than it tastes.”

“I like it,” Luke said, devouring his orange-cranberry muffin before reaching for another.

“Cheese on apple pie?” Dick said dubiously.

“I like cheese on basically anything,” he shrugged. “As far as I’m concerned, Velveeta should be its own separate food group.”

“So there were super powered masks around before the particle accelerator exploded?” Oliver turned to Felicity with a hard look, “And you didn’t think to share any of that with the team? Not even after Barry’s transformation?”

“Who’s Barry?” Dick asked, eating a blueberry muffin.

“The Flash,” Oliver told him, not taking his eyes off of Felicity.

“We had a Flash back in the day!” Wildcat said with a grin, “Name was Jay Garrick, helluva guy. Not perfect, but he was a good man, good sense of humor.” He looked around the table, “He killed me once, you know. With his hat.” He drew his thumb over his throat and made a slick sound like a knife cutting through flesh, “It was okay though; I kind of needed killing by that point and we had a good laugh about it afterwards. He’s still kickin’ around, too. Last I heard he was down on the West Coast somewhere. Around Keystone City, I think.”

“He killed you with his hat?” Luke asked, slack jawed.

“He used ta wear this goofy chrome hubcap lookin’ helmet on his head,” the older man said as he gestured as if to demonstrate its dimensions. “Sucker was sharp, too boy. That thing cut through my carotid like a hot knife through butter.”

That revelation only served to aggravate Oliver further. Felicity sighed, “Barry already knew about the original Flash,” she told him, “He even met with him a couple of times after he became the Flash when he was trying to figure out what happened. Even before he ‘transformed’, he did tons of research on him and any other members of the JSA he could find which is why he decided to call himself The Flash in the first place.”

Oliver’s jaw tensed, “And you knew that, Barry told you about that before his transformation?”

“Some of it, but most of it came afterwards,” she admitted.

“Did you tell him what you knew?”

“I’m the one who told him where he could find Jay Garrick in the first place,” she said easily. “But, for the record, I didn’t say anything until after he meta’d out and, even then, I didn’t say anything until he asked me to find the information for him. Like I said, he knew who the original Flash was, he just didn’t know his civilian identity or where to find him. I contacted Jay, explained the situation, then set up the meet.”

“Wait, so you just knew where this guy was at; his secret identity, everything?” Renee asked her.

“Um, kind of,” she said reluctantly. “If it’s on a computer I can find it. I just sort of hacked into a few Federal databases and, voila! Plus, as it turns out, Bruce bought his company, Garrick Laboratories, a
few years back and he stayed on as Director for a while so I really didn’t have to look that hard.”

“Just hacked into a couple of Federal databases,” Renee said slowly. “I still can’t get past level five in Plants VS Zombies.” She shook her head, “So how many masks do you know?”

“I don’t know, she frowned, “I kind of stopped counting a while back. At least forty though.”

“Forty?” Oliver bit out.

“Forty that I’ve actually met or spoken to in person,” she corrected. “If you want to know how many I’ve just heard of, then that might take a while.”

“She really is mask catnip,” Renee muttered to Laurel who was shaking her head bemusedly.

“You’ve met forty vigilantes?” Oliver repeated.

“Well, thirty-nine,” she corrected. “I never actually met the original Flash, I only spoke to him and his wife over the phone although they did invite me to come down there along with Barry for Thanksgiving last year. I think Barry made it but I couldn’t go because we had that whole Cheshire thing happening. Oh, and his wife still emails me occasionally.” She turned to Wildcat, “You’re right, they are such nice people and still very active in their community. Did you know he’s the mayor of Monument Point now? Plus, she runs a battered women’s shelter and started a community garden that provides the local homeless shelter and food bank with organic vegetables.”

“No shit,” Wildcat said in surprise. “Huh. Hey, how’s Joanie doin’ anyway?”

“Good, she had leukemia but went into remission after chemo. When I told her about my mom’s leukemia it turned into this big conversation and, since then, she’s kept in touch. They even sent me a Christmas card and some fruit preserves since she’s really into canning. Best apple butter I ever ate in my life; I’ll give you their number.” She paused, “Oh damn, I should call them and let them know I moved,” she said biting her lip before shaking it off. “You know, she pointed me toward a really good vegetable beef soup recipe that uses okra--”

“No shit,” Wildcat said in surprise. “Huh. Hey, how’s Joanie doin’ anyway?”

“Did you know all of these people before you met us?” Oliver injected angrily.

“No, only…” she did a quick calculation in her head, “eight or so before I joined Team Arrow and I didn’t even know they were all masks at the time. Six, well, technically eight but I’ll say six, I met at Orbital, and the rest I met while working with you guys. Still, I’ve only officially been on teams with eleven vigilantes. Well, no, twelve. Wait,” she bit her bottom lip again, “does Orbital count? Because, if so, then make that eighteen or twenty depending on who you count, possibly twenty-two vigilantes, but if not then we’re back down to twelve. Unless you count Barry’s team since I did help them a few times so that would be sixteen but I was never *officially* on the team so I still think twelve is a fair number. Oh, and FYI, I didn’t count Ray or Daniel in any of that otherwise, depending on which one you chose, we’d be up to eight, ten, fourteen, eighteen, twenty-two, or twenty-four. Possibly forty-two.”

Renee turned to Laurel, “Remind me to pick up a Powerball ticket later.”

“I’m thinking of getting one myself,” Laurel told her.

“How the hell do you know forty masks!” He said in frustration. “I don’t even know forty masks!”

“Well, technically you said ‘vigilantes’ not ‘masks’ but, in any case, I said *I* knew them, not that you did,” she said smoothly. “After all, you can be a vigilante without wearing a mask but, if we’re doing a mask count…” she squinted her eyes slightly as she tried to do a quick calculation in her
“Never mind!” He growled, “So you told Barry, fine; why not tell the rest of us?”

“Tell you what? Why? What difference would it have made? Besides, I really don’t know that much,” she told him. “Like I told you, I met most of them after I met you, not before, and my access into Bruce’s files was fairly limited. I was more interested in putting his system together than looking into every single file.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Dick told him. “Bruce always tried to keep Baby as far from our world as he could.”

He offered Felicity one more disgruntled look before turning to Wildcat, “So you’re saying aliens really exist along with magic and everything else?” Oliver asked, his posture still stiff with residual anger. “And you really believe that?”

“Yup,” he said confidently. “Not as weird as it sounds; Boy Wonder down there dated one for a while. Then again, so did I.” He looked over at Renee and winked, “Blonde; had a rack that made you want to say Merry Christmas and Ho, Ho, Ho, all year-long.”

Oliver turned to Dick, “You dated an alien?”

“At one point I was even engaged to one,” Dick nodded.

“What kind of alien?” Oliver asked curiously, his attention shifting to the man sitting at the opposite end of the table.

Dick frowned, “What do you mean?”

He eyed the other man uncertainly, “Not to seem rude, but did she look…?”

“Human?” He filled in, not sounding the least bit insulted. “Yes and no. She was humanoid, but her people evolved from felines so she had vaguely cat-like features.”

“Kori was part cat?” Felicity asked.

“Yes, and I can already guess what you’re thinking so stop,” Dick told her firmly.

“I’m not thinking anything,” Felicity told him.

He tossed her a wry glance, “Bullshit; you and Barb are birds of a feather.”

“Honestly, I’m not!” She told him. “I was just going to say that the idea of a cat person is pretty cool, that’s all. Plus, you know,” she tilted her head slightly.

“What?” He asked her.

“The cats and bats thing,” she offered, wrinkling her nose slightly, “You guys tend to go for the alliteration, no offense.”

“No, that’s okay,” he shrugged. “It’s kind of true and, besides, it’s better than what I thought you were going to say.”

She frowned, “What did you think I was going to say?”

“That’s okay, Boy Wonder,” Renee told him as she smeared some jam on her bagel, “I like a little
pussy myself occasionally.”

Luke and Wildcat began to snicker rudely and Dick sighed and gestured toward Renee, “That.”

“Cats are good, but I like dogs better,” Felicity mused. As everyone turned to look in her direction, she shrugged, “Not that it’s the same thing as what you guys were talking about, but still, I’m thinking about getting a pet so I figured I’d mention it. Cats are nice though; not to, you know, *date*, but nice.”

“I go both ways,” Laurel chimed in.

“Really?” Renee said with a wink causing all of the men with the exception of Oliver to snicker again while he merely rubbed the bridge of his nose wearily.

“Funny,” she said dryly. “So aliens are real.” Laurel said shaking her head as she reached for the strawberry cream cheese and began smearing it on a cinnamon raisin bagel. “I can’t wait to tell my dad about that one.”

“I can’t wait to be there when you do,” Felicity muttered.

“I knew about the alien thing already,” Renee said, speaking up. “The magic thing though…Vic and Dragon were always talking about mysticism in martial arts but I didn’t think it was the full-tilt boogie hocus pocus type stuff.”

“Yup,” Wildcat said. popping the last of his bagel into his mouth and chewing as he reached for another. “It happened when this asshole callin’ himself ‘King Inferno’ tried to get me to throw a fight. When I wouldn’t do it, he put a curse on me that was supposed to turn me into a cat.” He chuckled, “Son of a bitch thought he was making a funny ‘cause of my handle. He was plannin’ on tossin’ me into a pack of dogs or some other cliché bad guy bullshit but Zatara, that was the name of my buddy, he intervened. Unfortunately, it’s apparently impossible to completely reverse a spell cast by another sorcerer so instead of becomin’ a real cat it gave me enhanced vision, decelerated aging, and nine lives.”

“So…you’ve really died before?” Renee asked slowly. “Like totally dead-dead, not just clinically dead?”

“Yup,” he told her. “We’re talkin’ choirs of angels dead…not that I remember ever seein’ any, but still.”

“How many times?” Oliver asked.

“Bunch o’ times,” he told him. “At first we thought it gave me just nine lives but then I came back a tenth time and that’s when Doctor Fate, another magic guy in the JSA, figured out that in order to really die I had to die nine times in a row in less than 24 hours which is why I’m only sort of immortal. I can still die, just not easily.”

“So how long can you live for?” Laurel asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said gruffly, a slight tinge of sadness coloring his tone. “It’s been over seventy years since I got that curse put on me and I look like I’ve aged maybe fifteen. I got a few new scars, some extra wrinkles, and plenty o’ gray hairs, but physically the doc says I got the body of a twenty year old in his prime.”

“Too bad you don’t have the face to match,” Luke joked causing the old man to throw him a mock glare.
“Watch it, kid,” he told him. “You might be a hot shit amateur MMA fighter but I was the heavyweight champion of the world and I can still kick your ass.”

“It must be hard watching all the people you love get old and die,” Felicity said quietly and Wildcat offered her a small upturn of his lips.

“Yeah, well, it’s one of the reasons I never got married. I thought about it a few times,” he admitted. “I even had a couple of kids but, other than Polly, I never really let anybody get that close.”

“You have kids?” She asked him.

He nodded, “Well, just one now. My first son, Jake, was killed back in ‘61 when he was just a baby. I never really even knew him, his mom and I had a brief affair and she got pregnant but I never knew about him until they were both gone. I tried lookin’ for ‘em but I never found hide nor hair so they were declared legally dead a couple of years later.” He paused, his eyes taking on a haunted quality before speaking again, “My other son, Tom, his mom wasn’t quite a one night stand but close. I didn’t meet him until he was in his twenties. He knew about me though and, after I found him, he had kind of a chip on his shoulder about it. I tried telling him I never knew about him but, while he wasn’t bitter, he was still kind of pissed that I didn’t make more of an effort to be in his life sooner. He said that if he could find me then I should have been able to find him.”

Oliver winced and, despite being annoyed at him, Felicity couldn’t help but feel some measure of sympathy for him. Wildcat’s story probably brought home exactly what she had been trying to tell him about Connor.

“So are you guys straight now?” Renee asked him.

“Kind of,” he told her. “He’s still sort of stand-offish but I drop in on him and his buddies every once in a while; make sure he knows his old man is still around. I even got a standin’ invitation to Thanksgivin’ even though I haven’t taken ‘em up on it. I just pop by and make sure everything’s good, drop a few bucks on the table since he’s still in college, then head out.” He perked up, “Now he is a meta-human,” he said turning to Oliver. “He’s a shapeshifter who turns into a kind of were-panther.”

Oliver threw him an incredulous look, “Seriously? A were-panther?”

Wildcat nodded, “He goes by the handle ‘Tomcat’. I wanted him to take the ‘Wildcat’ handle since I’m technically retired but he turned me down, said he didn’t want to be like me.” His expression took on a hint of melancholy, “You know, if I could go back and do things over again I would have stuck with his mom.” He rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced, “She and I had known each other a while, had a kind of slow burn, then just burst into flames one weekend. We only had one real night together before I sent her away for her own good. Shit hit the fan, as usual, and we were dealing with a bunch of stuff, she got hurt and nearly died, so that was that. I wanted to protect her so I told the team doc patch her up and get rid of her then walked out. I didn’t even look back ‘cause I knew if I did...” He exhaled roughly. “I had no idea she was pregnant. I know why she didn’t tell me, I hurt her pretty bad so I get it. In my defense, I knew if I gave her the choice she would have stayed and I wanted her safe so I figured breakin’ her heart was better than gettin’ her killed. That said,” he shook his head, “if I could go back I would’ve never let her go. I would have done right by her and been there for my kid.”

Oliver’s eyes met hers and she could see the flicker of emotions in their depths. Part of her wanted to reach out and offer him some sort of comfort but she didn’t want to risk sending out mixed signals. Wildcat’s story affected her as well. Oliver found out about Connor shortly before the thing with Slade and for the last seven months she’d been trying to get him to have a relationship with his son.
While she understood that he had good reason to believe his presence could bring unwanted attention, all his son would think was that he had a father who never wanted him and sent him away as soon as he found out he was alive.

She met Laurel’s eyes. The other woman gave her a pained look as if to say that talking to Oliver would do no good; until he was ready to allow Connor in his life, no amount of cajoling on their parts would change his mind. She nodded slightly and Laurel’s mouth softened into a gentle smile.

She really was a wonderful person; Felicity could see it now. She could finally see the woman who had captured the hearts of Oliver and Tommy. This Laurel, the one who wasn’t trying to be perfect, who didn’t have drugs or alcohol weighing her down, who no longer allowed herself to succumb to mindless jealousy; this was the person she couldn’t see before now. A slight shimmer of guilt hit her then for all the unkind thoughts she’d ever had of the other woman through the years but what was done was done. The past was gone and now all they had was the future to look forward to. She reached under the table to place her hand in Laurel’s and the other woman started slightly before squeezing her fingers in return and swallowed back obvious tears at her gesture.

This Laurel, the one who shared her table and sat on her couch, this woman was her friend, she realized. She wasn’t Perfect Laurel, or Gorgeous Laurel, just Laurel; a woman who was at times terribly flawed but oh so human, just like the rest of them.

‘Thanks,’ she mouthed and Felicity squeezed her hand one more time before letting go and looking to Wildcat.

“Are you going to be at Orbital tonight for the mission?” She asked.

“That’s the plan,” he told her, his slightly flirty smile returning. “Bruce told me to stick by your side so that’s what I intend to do. Hell, if I’d known you gals were goin’ ta go all Wild Wild West last night I woulda driven you home after all! You really shot some guy twice then ran over the other two with your car?”

“Yep,” she told him.

“Actually she ran them over four times,” Dick said dryly.

Wildcat’s eyebrows nearly hit the roof, “Four times?”

“It was not four times!” She said rolling her eyes at him. “It was just two times—each.”

“Shit,” he chuckled, “I knew after I watched you kick Helena’s ass you were somethin’ else, but damn honey, you sure you don’t want to dump that man of yours and run away with me instead?” He asked with a naughty grin. “We could have some real fun times!”

“I think I’m a little too old for you,” she told him with an answering smile, “I’d never be able to keep up.”

“Oh, I’m sure you could manage just fine, honey,” he said with a downright dirty wink.

“You got into it with Helena?” Oliver asked his eyes narrowing on the much older man.

“Uh huh,” Felicity said with a proud half-smile, “I beat her good, too.” She turned to Laurel, “Did you see her hair? The way it was all sticking up and ragged in the back? I did that; nearly snatched her bald right after I kicked her leather clad ass!”

“She was definitely looking rough,” Laurel agreed. “Loved the broken nose, by the way. She looked
like a raccoon.”

“Thanks!” She said brightly.

“She could have killed you,” Oliver said disapprovingly.

“Son, I think you got that backwards,” Wildcat chuckled. “When this little cutie told Helena that she was thinkin’ about dumpin’ her dead and broken body into the river if she kept pissin’ her off, she about swallowed her tongue. Hell, I didn’t know whether I should be scared shitless or pop a boner.”

“Gross,” Dick grimaced dropping his bagel. “Ugh! I did not need that image, especially not while eating.”

Luke looked equally green around the gills while Renee just grinned at her.

“Damn, chica!” She whistled appreciatively. “That’s hot!”

“I was just bluffing,” Felicity said, cheeks flushing.

“If you were having to bluff then you shouldn’t have been challenging her in the first place!” Oliver glowered. “Why in the hell would you even--!” He rubbed his hand over his mouth and drew his lips into a hard line.

“I didn’t *have* to bluff,” she said roundly, her irritation creeping through in the form of sarcasm. “I could have just killed Helena at any time but I was wearing a borrowed outfit and I didn’t want to get blood all over it. *That* would’ve been rude.”

Luke, Oliver, and Dick all looked at her with expressions ranging from stunned silence to glaring disapproval while Laurel and Renee each struggled to keep a straight face. Wildcat, however, chuckled bemusedly since he was apparently the only man in the room who didn’t have a stick firmly jammed up his ass.

“You think that’s funny?” Oliver challenged.

“Yup,” she said, popping the ‘p’ in as obnoxious a manner as she could.

Dick’s mouth hung open slightly in an expression of complete disbelief, “Do you even know what Bruce would say if he heard you talking about killing someone that casually?”

She tilted her head in his direction and pursed her lips as if she were actually thinking about it, “I don’t know Dick, you could call and ask but he’d probably just tell me to use his card to buy a new sports bra and biker shorts for Tatsu. I probably should do that anyway, tell you the truth. Hey Laurel, remind me to put that on the list along with a big jar of Vaseline.”


She smiled brightly. “Well, I just figured if you guys are going to keep jamming your heads up your butts it might come in handy. Unless, of course, you’re into rough trade.”

Renee snorted rudely before clapping her hand over her mouth.

Wildcat chuckled, “You gotta admit, that was a good one!”

Laurel hid her face in her hands and began making this strange choking sound.

“Are you okay?” Oliver asked glaring at her.
Laurel looked up, snorting and laughing like a pig, tears running down her cheeks, “Your head…” she pointed at him through her sobbing laughter, “…is jammed up your butt so you need…you need lube for your *asshole*!” She paused to clutch her stomach and catch her breath, “Which is kind of weird when you think about it,” she sputtered through barely contained giggles, “because *you’re* acting like an asshole, so it’s like…an asshole inside of…an asshole…like some kind of asshole turducken!” And at that she burst into an obnoxiously loud belly laugh that nearly caused her to fall out of her chair, “I w-wonder if they sell those at the grocery store! Oh God! I’m going to pee myself!”

At that point, it became sheer chaos. Within seconds Laurel, Wildcat, and Renee were all slapping the table and laughing so hard tears were running down their faces while Luke and Dick snickered and Oliver sat stone-faced looking quite unamused. He turned his icy stare toward Felicity who was still calmly eating her salad.

“Happy?” He asked flatly.

“Kind of,” she said wrinkling her nose, “Not sure yet; I’ve never actually had turducken before.”

“Ow!”

At that point Laurel’s butt left the chair.

Her bladder, luckily, managed to hold up just fine.

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A while later all three women were showered and dressed, playing around on different tablets, as they waited for Tam to show up with the decorators. The guys were all still in the kitchen, having gotten dressed themselves, and apparently having a good time as every once in a while the sounds of male laughter would filter throughout the mostly unfurnished apartment.

“Why does Bruce have all these tablets just lying around all over the place?” Laurel asked, looking up. “Every room I’ve been in has at least two or three docking stations just sitting there; I even had two in my bedroom and one in the bathroom. I know he’s a billionaire, but still; how many tablets do you need?”

“He likes his toys and he likes to have his tech close at hand when he needs to access something. Having to walk all the way into another room for something generally pisses him off, unless he’s already pissed off and just trying to calm down, especially since he’s not exactly the most patient guy in the world,” Felicity told her without looking up. “Besides, his company makes them so they’re pretty much free. Go ahead and keep them if you want, he won’t care. There’s a whole stack of them downstairs.”

“Thanks,” Renee said with a grin. “She’s right though, the Bat does like his gadgets and he’s definitely not afraid to use them. Speaking of gimme’s though, are you sure your friend won’t mind that you gave me this?” Renee asked as she straightened the labels on the men’s style tan suede jacket.

“She was planning on giving it away anyway but if she has a problem with it Tam can get another,” she said absently as she clicked on another link before looking up. “I’m just glad it fit otherwise you would’ve had to toss your stuff in with the load I put on earlier.” The Brunello Cucinelli jacket, open necked shirt, and flare legged olive green pants fit Renee perfectly much to Felicity’s surprise, “You’re lucky Tam never takes anything in to get altered until the last possible moment. Is the sweater okay?” She managed to find one of Bruce’s sweaters for her as well. The olive green
cashmere sweater with leather patches on the elbows went well with the outfit even if it was a little on the large side. Still, with so many of the car’s windows shattered they’d need all the warmth they could get.

“Yeah,” Renee said with a grin as she ran her hand over the soft textured pattern over her stomach, “Got news for Bruce though; he ain’t gettin’ it back and I’m keeping the socks, too.” She wiggled her toes in her stocking feet, her boots sitting on the floor by the couch as all three of them were curled up in basically the same positions they had been earlier that morning.

“Might as well keep his boxers while you’re at it,” Felicity told her.

“Oh, that’s a given. I’m tempted to do another wardrobe raid on his dresser later; who knew men’s underpants were this comfortable? I’m actually thinking of tossing my bikini cuts and becoming a total Drag King,” Renee said then frowned and let out a muffled curse as she stared at the screen on her tablet. “Damn zombies! They keep getting to my sunflowers.” She set her tablet aside and glanced over at Laurel, “What are you doing over there, hot stuff?”

“Playing Words with Friends with some idiot who is somehow beating the pants off of me,” she grimaced. “I think all the hot yoga I did in rehab took away my ability to spell.”

Felicity glanced over at Laurel and took a moment to admire the outfit she’d picked out as well. They all agreed that ‘warm’ was the word of the day so she let the other woman raid her personal clothes stash for a Michael Kors silk/wool blend cowl neck sweater in a warm fawn color that reached the top of her thighs and a pair of matching leggings since she already had a pair of Kate Spade booties that worked with it. While she and Laurel were both size fours, the other woman wore a size eight and a half shoe. However, she was able to give her a really nice Versace peacoat in black with embroidered leather sleeves. She grabbed it when they were going through Tam’s storage units but, really, it wasn’t her style. Mostly she just took it so she’d have something her sister could steal back right off the bat.

Keeping with the day’s theme, Felicity decided to go for comfort as well so she was in her standby Donna Karan cold weather outfit: Slate gray leggings, cashmere tank, and a draped open front cashmere cardigan in a matching shade of ivory. It reached past her knees and a pair of matching leggings since she already had a pair of Kate Spade booties that worked with it. While she and Laurel were both size fours, the other woman wore a size eight and a half shoe. However, she was able to give her a really nice Versace peacoat in black with embroidered leather sleeves. She grabbed it when they were going through Tam’s storage units but, really, it wasn’t her style. Mostly she just took it so she’d have something her sister could steal back right off the bat.

Oops. “Hey, remind me to pick Bruce up some socks,” she said looking back down at her tablet. “He’s running a little low. Also some underwear.”

“Pick up a pack for me, too,” Renee said absently. “Fucking zombie bastards! Learn how to spell!”

“You know, Renee is right; who knew men’s clothes were this comfortable? I never really wore Oliver and Tommy’s clothes but now I wish I had,” Laurel said, admiring her toes that were currently encased in a pair of his taupe silk and wool blend dress socks. “It’s like silky cushy love for your feet that go all the way up to your knees; I’m totally buying myself a pack.”

“I like them too,” Felicity said absently, “That’s why he’s running low. However, I figure that since we’re eventually getting married that makes them community property so I’m not planning on stopping anytime soon; ditto on the undershirts and boxers.”

“How much longer do we need to wait until your sister gets here?” Renee asked. “This is the fifth time the zombies have gotten into my house.”
Felicity looked at the time, “Uh, it’s not quite nine yet; let’s give her another ten minutes then we’ll leave. I just wanted to introduce you guys and give Laurel a chance to let her know what she wants done to her room but we can probably just catch her later if we have to.”

“Wait, what?” Laurel said, looking up in surprise.

“What?” she said following another link.

“What did you just say?”

“Oh,” she looked up from her tablet, “Uh, that we were going to wait another few minutes for Tam then take off.”

“No, you said something about my room?”

“Yeah,” Felicity frowned. “Unless of course you want to decorate it yourself. I’ll just tell Tam to leave it and we can use Bruce’s card to order whatever you want.”

“You want me to pick out the decorations for the room I’m staying in?” She said incredulously. “Like the furniture and paint and stuff?”

“Yeah, unless you like it the way it is now. I just figured that since you’re going to be living here you might want to make it your own,” she said with a shrug. “Unless you don’t like the room you’re in, in which case you can choose a different one and decorate it instead.”

The other woman blinked, “So when you told Ollie that this was our apartment you meant it; that this is *our* apartment? Yours, mine, your sister’s, and Sara’s?”

“Well, technically it’s Bruce’s apartment but since me, you, Sara, and Tam are going to be living here together; yeah, it’s our apartment. Until, of course, I move in with Bruce at the manor and then it’ll just be the three of you,” she frowned. “Unless you don’t want to live here, in which case I can talk to Bruce and he can find you something in one of his other buildings instead. The Gotham real estate scene can be pretty intense…”

“No, I mean, when you said I could stay here I thought you meant as a temporary guest,” she said slowly.

“Oh. Well, like I said, if you’d rather--?”

“No,” she said quickly, breaking out into a smile, “No, I’d love to live with you guys,” she said with a snuffle.

Her lip began to tremble as her eyes filled with tears and Felicity blanched, “Did I say something wrong?”

“I don’t think so,” Renee said, staring at her as well. “Whoa!” Renee dropped her tablet to the side and held up her hands as Laurel lunged across her lap to gather Felicity into a hug.

“Thank you,” she said brokenly as she sniffled. “I’m just…thank you.”

“It’s okay,” Felicity said, patting her on the back awkwardly.

“Well, I’m having fun,” Renee muttered as she eyed the woman now lying across her lap. “This is like a really emotional fully-clothed lap dance.”

Laurel pulled back, wiping her eyes with her fingers, “I’m sorry, I just, um…” she sniffled and
Renee reached into her jacket pocket and handed her a linen handkerchief with an embroidered W along the edge. “Thank you.”

Felicity frowned and pointed at the starched white men’s handkerchief in confusion.

“Swiped it from Bruce’s drawer when I stole his socks, boxer briefs, and undershirt,” she offered.

“Oh, okay,” she said.

“By the way, I’m keeping the undershirt, too,” Renee added. “It feels like it’s made out of angel skin; that makes it mine.”

“He’s got plenty,” Felicity said, waving her off.

“Fair enough,” she returned. “You know, not that I’m complaining, but Bruce has kind of frou frou taste for such a tough guy. His underwear is like this amazing stretchy soft silky cotton, his undershirts are made of real silk, and I’m pretty sure I don’t even want to know how much these socks cost much less the sweater.”

“He might be Batman but he likes comfort,” she told her. “In his defense though, he doesn’t really do his own shopping; Alfred does. I have a feeling that he thinks the clothes just magically appear in the drawers.”

She tilted her head in consideration, “Damn I wish I was rich. I could really use a magical clothes fairy.”

Laurel wiped her nose then stuffed the hankie into her sleeve, “We might need to steal a few more then; it seems like I cry at a drop of the hat these days.”

“It’s okay,” Felicity told her with a slight upturn of her lips, “We’ll just stock up on Kleenex when we go to the grocery store.”

“I was the same way when I got out of rehab,” Renee offered. “When you come back to the real world, because you’re straight now, you start feeling guilty for all the fucked up shit you did when you were drinking so whenever someone says anything nice to you, you don’t know whether to burst into tears or run screaming in the opposite direction.”

Her cheeks flushed and her eyes grew watery again, “Yeah, but I did some really, really fucked up shit; especially to Felicity.” She bit her lip and looked at her, “I’m so sorry. I can’t believe you’d be willing to take me in like this after all the things I said to you and the way I treated you in the hospital…”

“That’s all done and gone; water under the bridge,” Felicity said in a kind but firm tone. “If it helps, I said some very mean things, too.”

“No, you didn’t,” she said, untucking the hankie and swiping at her cheeks again. “You were always really nice to me.”

“Yeah, to your face,” Felicity said roundly. “Behind your back though I was a flaming bitch.” The other woman snorted into the handkerchief and all three of them began chuckling again.

“What is it you’ve been doing on that tablet all morning anyway?” Renee asked, pointing to the device Felicity was still holding in her hand.

“Oh, I was just Google Fishing.”
Renee furrowed her brow, “Google what-ing?”

“You know when you look something up online then follow a link that leads to another link and, before you know it, you’re like a million miles from where you started?” She asked her. “That’s Google Fishing.”

“Oh, I’ve done that,” she nodded. “I’ve even Googled myself a few times; was that what you were doing?”

“No,” she told her. “Gypsy told me some stuff yesterday so I decided to look it up,”

“Who’s Gypsy?” Renee asked.

“She’s one of the operators inside of Orbital,” Laurel supplied. “She’s a meta but she’s also a little weird.”

“Isn’t that the basic setting for metas; weird?” Renee joked.

“She’s a little more weird than that,” Felicity said wryly. “She kept insisting that I was some kind of metahuman as well.”

“Well, you do have a big huge brain,” Laurel said lightly.

“Yes, yes I do, but that’s not what she meant,” she said smartly. “She kept insisting I was doing something to Isabel.”

“You never even touched Isabel,” Laurel frowned.

“Ugh,” Renee said, curling her lip in distaste, “be glad you didn’t.”

“Okay, I’m not a fan either but Isabel’s not that bad once you get to know her,” Felicity admitted reluctantly. “She’s not that good either…okay, so she is that bad, but she had a really rough childhood so…”

“Who didn’t?” Renee shot back. “I grew up in a pastel themed hellhole with a step-mother who kept insisting I wear dresses 24/7 and warned me if I didn’t start wearing lipgloss that people would think I was a ‘butchie dyke’ like my mother and that God was going to strike me down with ‘girl cancer’ like he did her as punishment. Meanwhile, all I kept wondering was when my penis was going to grow in so I could pee standing up just like my brothers.”

“Isabel grew up in a slave labor camp where rape and incest were the norm and, when she was fifteen, her virginity was ‘given’ to the new owner of the diamond mine as a ‘gift’ by the mine’s foreman who also raped her mother and who she suspected of being her biological father,” Felicity told her.

“Jesus,” Laurel breathed, her expression horrified.

“Well…don’t I feel like an asshole,” Renee said with a similar expression on her face.

“Don’t worry about it,” she told her. “While I sympathize with her, it doesn’t excuse her behavior now; it just puts it in better context.”

“Did anything ever happen to the foreman and the son of a bitch who raped her?” Renee asked.

“Um,” she glanced over towards the kitchen where the guys were beginning to emerge, “You could say that. It’s…kind of a long story but, suffice it to say, they’re both dead now.”
“Who’s dead now?” Oliver asked with a frown as he approached them.

“Some of the characters on The Walking Dead,” she said absently.

“The Walking what?” He said with a frown.

“Zombies,” Luke said as he flopped down on the other end of the sectional next to Laurel.

“So what kind of meta human does she think you are?” Laurel asked, picking up on the subject change.

“Who’s a meta human?” Dick asked as he took the chaise Wildcat wasn’t occupying while Oliver took the other couch.

“Me apparently,” she told him.


“I know that, but this woman at Orbital was absolutely convinced that I was somehow like her,” Felicity said, glancing at her tablet and opening up another tab.

“Are you talkin’ about Gypsy?” Wildcat asked her.

“Yeah, she kept insisting that she could see my aura and that I was something called a ‘Child of Inanna’.”

“Gypsy is the girl a member of my team helped last year,” Dick said slowly. “Bruce mentioned that she was with Orbital now.”

“What’s a ‘Child of Inanna’ and what kind of powers does this girl have anyway?” Luke asked.

“And what kind of powers does she think you have?” Oliver added with a frown.

“Gypsy can cast illusions with her mind,” Wildcat told them. “She’s a real sweet kid, handy with electronics, but her powers are mostly passive. She can’t really hurt anybody, just trick them by making them see stuff that ain’t there.”

“If she thinks Baby has superpowers then she’s the one seeing stuff that isn’t there,” Luke scoffed. “The only power she has is the ability to empty a carton of Ben and Jerry’s when she’s stressed out.”

“Thanks Luke,” she told her brother dryly. “but to answer your question, she thinks I’m like her; one of these ‘Children of Inanna’,,” she said, scrolling through the links. “I’ve been playing around all morning trying to figure out what she’s talking about and, even though I haven’t found much, it’s been a pretty interesting read so far.”

“I’ve heard of Inanna,” Renee said slowly. “Inanna is some kind of witch goddess, right? I dated a girl who was into metaphysics and Wicca, stuff like that, and she was constantly going on and on about her and about embracing my inner goddess.”

“No,” Felicity said with a crooked grin. “Actually she’s a six thousand year old Sumerian goddess of love, passion, war, along with a bunch of other stuff. I can see why your ex liked her though; Ishtar, Astarte, Kwan Yin, Venus, Aphrodite, Parvati, Cybele, Brighid, and tons of others, each of them were just different incarnations of Inanna. Plus, she kind of got around in more ways than one if you know what I mean,” she said raising her eyebrows meaningfully. “Some of this poetry is pretty spicy.”
“That actually makes sense,” the other woman said. “That relationship was all fighting and fucking with the occasional burning of sage. The whole apartment smelled like sex and burnt Thanksgiving turkey.”

“I dated one of those,” Wildcat said with a chuckle. “She could go down on my magic wand faster than you could say Bibbity-Bobbity-Boo!”

“Moving on,” Dick said with a long-suffering eye roll, “What is it she thinks you can do; cast illusions?”

“I have no idea, honestly,” she said. “All she said was that I did something to Isabel and then she asked me if I was one of the Children of Inanna because my aura looked like her grandmother’s.”

Laurel frowned, “Wait, if she’s a gypsy then why is she calling herself a ‘Child of Inanna’? Are gypsies even from the Middle East?”

“I can answer that one,” Dick told her. “I’m actually Romani myself.”

“You’re a gypsy?” Oliver said arching his eyebrow in the other man’s direction.

“Romani, Rom, or Roma, ‘gypsy’ is sometimes considered pejorative,” Dick corrected him, “but yes. My parents were both circus performers and kept a lot of the Romani customs. The reason Romani are called ‘gypsies’ is because people thought we originated from Egypt but some believe we actually started off in India. Others say Babylon or Sumer which is now Iraq and Iran, and still others believe the Romani are actually one of the wandering tribes of Israel because they still keep many of the same rituals and customs as Jews.”

“Yeah, I’ve been reading about that.” Felicity told him. “I started off looking up the words ‘Children of Inanna’ and found a bunch of sites on the Romani. Apparently the traditional ‘dance of the seven veils’ is basically a retelling of Inanna’s Descent into the Underworld. This one site I found traced the immigration of the Romani all over the world and in every country and culture they assimilated into, coincidently that culture had a goddess who was also an aspect of Inanna along with a similar story about her descent into hell followed by her resurrection.”

“That’s actually kind of interesting,” Laurel said, picking up her own tablet and beginning a search. “Huh? Apparently this Inanna is part bird,” she frowned showing an ancient stone relief of a naked woman with the wings and feet of a bird standing on the backs of two lions and accompanied by two large owls who stood like sentries on either side of her image.

“What’s with the lions?” Renee asked, taking it from her.

“According to what I read, Inanna was supposedly so beautiful and charming that she was able to pluck the teeth from a lion’s jaws. Also, in a bunch of her myths she rides around on the back of a lion, a tiger, or a dragon representing her courage and strength,” Felicity said. “She was kind of an all-around animal lover though but lions, dogs, horses, and birds were her favorites. Oh and, of course, dragons.”

“Dragons?” Luke grinned. “Cool, I always wanted a pet dragon; think you can call your little buddy and get me one?”

She ignored him. “Anyway, when I was Google Fishing I found something kind of interesting, especially given what you were talking about earlier,” she looked at Wildcat. “According to these conspiracy websites the Sumerian gods were called the Annunaki.”

“The Annunaki, which some scholars translated as meaning ‘those who came from the heavens’. Basically they believe that these gods were actually aliens who genetically engineered the human race to be more compatible with their own physiology. There’s all kinds of stuff out there about intelligent design and how our early ancestors somehow went from having forty-eight chromosomes to forty-six and how the second and third chromosome strands fusing making us go from primates to homo sapiens is a sign of genetic manipulation.” She frowned, “Then again, they also talk about Bigfoot a lot so take it with a grain of salt.”

“Wait, so these people think aliens came down to Earth just to have sex with us?” Renee asked dubiously.

“Basically, yeah,” she told her. “They’re also described as being the ‘Nephilim’, as in the offspring of angels and women that are mentioned in Genesis.”

“So you think that the Romani are the descendants of either aliens or angels?” Dick said flatly.

“I don’t,” she said quickly, “but I started thinking about something Wildcat said about aliens always being here. Gypsy told me her clan had their abilities long before the particle accelerator exploded; maybe there’s a reason for that?”

“Baby, I think you’ve been watching too much Syfy channel,” Luke said off-handedly. “Now when are we going to the car dealership so we can all be arrested?”

“You’re not coming with me,” Felicity said with a scowl.

“Yes, we are,” Oliver said firmly. “If you insist on doing this then we’re going to be there in case things go sideways. Unless, of course, you’re willing to admit that this is a bad idea and just let me take it to one of my Bratva contacts here in Gotham to have it stripped.”

“Better yet, you could have Alfred take it like Bruce wants that way we wouldn’t have to call in the Russian mob or get arrested,” Dick said dryly.


“What about you?” She turned to Wildcat who just grinned, “I assume you’re with the guys on this one?”

“Actually I’m just taggin’ along to watch,” he told her. “I gotta admit I’m kind of interested on just how it is you’re plannin’ on pullin’ this off and what the spray paint’s for.”

“You want to know what it’s for? Fine,” she turned to Renee, “Would you mind going downstairs with the guys and supervise while they spray paint gang signs and graffiti on my car? Doesn’t matter what they paint on it, just make it look authentic. Oh, and don’t forget your tablet,” she said, “Take pictures when they’re done then just upload them onto Watchtower’s cloud.”

“So that’s what you’re planning on doing? Telling the dealership that it was vandalized with spray paint and bullets,” Renee said flatly. “You do realize that’s not going to work, right? You’ll need a police report and then they’re going to call the station to verify it. With a car that expensive, it wouldn’t surprise me if the adjustor even stopped by the station to talk to the detective on the case.”

“We’ll see,” she told her. “Just don’t forget to send me the pictures.”

“Okay,” she said getting off the couch, “Come on fellas, looks like I just signed on to teach a crash course on Gotham Graffiti 101.”
Luke and Dick got up to follow along with Wildcat. The older man looked down at Oliver who had yet to shift from his place on the couch, “You comin’?”

“I think I’ll let you guys have all the fun,” he said, his eyes locked on Felicity.

He grinned and glanced over at Felicity who was ignoring him, “Good luck.”

Idiots, she thought as she kept her eyes on her tablet. Like a few measly bullet holes were a big deal? Please. She quickly brought up the paperwork she had prepared earlier that morning and set it to print. How they didn’t already know by now that she had this in the bag was beyond her. What did they think she was going to do? Walk into the dealership empty-handed and say, ‘Oh Mr. Car Guy, I’m cute, blonde, and my car has bullets in it; may I please have a new one?’

She might be blonde but she wasn’t that blonde.

It hadn’t been all that hard to hack into the GCPD and find a report of a vandalized vehicle with similar damage. All she then had to do was duplicate the report in the system, add a few details, change out the VIN numbers and vehicle description, and then file it on their servers. She’d wandered down to the parking garage briefly after leaving Oliver and made note of the three bullet holes in the trunk as well as the dents and other damage then added those to the report as well. The GCPD received reports of tagging and vandalism dozens of times a day so, chances are, the overrun police detective whose name she forged probably wouldn’t notice if an extra file happened across his desktop. She also made sure to backdate the report by a few days so that, even if she did run into an overzealous insurance adjustor, no one would connect Isabel’s car to the shooting last night.

“Laurel, do you mind if I speak to Felicity alone for a minute?” Oliver asked, breaking the silence.

The other woman looked up from her own tablet, “Oh, I’m sorry; did you want me to leave?”

“Yes, actually, I do, thanks,” he told her.

“No,” Laurel said, looking back down at her tablet and scrolling down the page.

“What?” Oliver said with a scowl.

“Hey, Felicity,” Laurel said ignoring him.

“Yeah,” she looked up, trying not to smirk at the increasingly frustrated expression on Oliver’s face.

“I started looking up that Inanna thing and I found something kind of funny,” she said with a slight smile. “Did you know that Inanna apparently had a thing for starlings?”

“Really?” She asked, reaching for her tablet. “I knew she had a thing for doves and birds of prey but I didn’t know the starling thing.”

“Yeah, well, according to this article it was likely that, instead of doves, she was more closely associated with starlings since they’re actually more often linked with peace and love in that part of the world than doves are. Also, most of the art associated with her shows her with wings that are more similar to a starling’s than a dove’s and that her ‘rainbow girdle’ and fondness for dressing in anything from pure white to all sorts of bright colors supports that since starlings’ plumage varies wildly. Also, did you know that a starling and a mynah are the same thing? I found this other article,” she reached over and opened a tab, “here that says that these birds, called the Brahminy or Pagoda Mynahs used to roost in temples and that they became so synonymous with the goddess of love that the name ‘mynah’ in Sanskrit means ‘lovers.’”
“Huh,” she said scrolling through it. “So what are you saying? That because my handle is Starling that’s why Gypsy leapt to the conclusion she did?”

“Maybe,” she shrugged. “I just kind of thought it was interesting.” She frowned, “Damn, first I find myself flirting with Renee and now I’m talking about birds. All of the sudden I’m turning into Sara. Next thing you know I’ll be hooking up with Nyssa.”

“You chose Starling as your handle?” Oliver asked with a note of smug amusement.

Felicity turned to him, “Yes, so?”

His lips turned upwards as his eyes swept over her, “Homesick, are we?”

“Sara came up with it,” she told him flatly.

“Right,” he said roundly.

“Ollie, what the hell are you doing?” Laurel asked wearily.

“What do you mean?” He asked innocently.

“Cut the crap,” she told him without heat. “Why are you even here?”

“I’m here to take both of you back to Starling City,” he said with an edge of annoyance.

“To what end?” She asked him simply. “There’s nothing left for me there, I’m here to make a fresh start on my own. Felicity is happy, she’s getting married—”

“Felicity isn’t getting married to Wayne,” he said firmly.

“So, what? She’s supposed to be with you instead?” She asked incredulously.

His cheeks flushed in a combination of anger and regret, “You know what, I didn’t want you to find out like this, but, yes; I plan on being in a relationship with Felicity when we get home.”

“Do you now?” Felicity asked him dryly.

“Yes, I do,” he said, his eyes locking onto hers. “In fact, I intend to marry her eventually.”

Felicity tightened her lips in annoyance, “Don’t you think I should have some say in that?”

“You already did when you admitted that you were in love with me,” he shot back.

Laurel’s mouth curved upwards, “Oh Ollie, I honestly don’t know whether to hit you upside the head or stage an intervention because you have really gone around the bend if you think that A) after all the crap I’ve been through with you that hurts and B) that Felicity is going to go for an offer like that.”

Felicity put down her tablet and sat up a little straighter, interested in where the other woman was planning on taking this since her words on the subject had so far been completely ignored. Laurel wasn’t angry, there was no heat behind her words, meanwhile Oliver was looking both perplexed and increasingly frustrated by what she was saying.

“First off, I’m sorry I hurt you Laurel but this is between Felicity and me,” he said firmly. “Secondly, you and I both know that the last thing you need is to be alone in a strange city; especially one as dangerous as Gotham. Felicity and I are going home and I would like you to come with us but,
you’re right, ultimately that’s your decision to make, not mine. If you want to stay, stay, but Felicity and I are leaving as soon as we clear up this mess the two of you stumbled into.”

Laurel’s smile widened slightly and she glanced over at Felicity’s increasingly irritated expression before clearing her throat and schooling her face into a more subdued expression, “You’re right, Oliver. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay,” he said somewhat stiffly. “Now, if you’ll excuse us--”

“One thing though,” she said, holding up her finger to hold him off, “just out of curiosity, and stop me if I’m crossing a line here, but why exactly would Felicity want to leave Gotham to return to Starling City with you?”

He stiffened, his mouth tightening into a grimace, “Laurel, I’m trying very hard not to hurt your feelings here…”

“No, you should answer her,” Felicity told him. “I’m kind of curious about that one myself.”

He looked from one woman to the other before shifting slightly and focusing on Felicity, “Like I said, you’re in love with me.”

“And?”

“I’m not getting into this again, damn it!” He growled. “You’re in love with me, I’m in love with you, and we belong together!”

“Are you in love with him?” Laurel asked her in a casual, almost bored tone.

“Yes, but I’m also in love with Bruce and, quite frankly, all of my stuff is here and they gave away my house,” she told her in an equally blasé tone.

“You can move in with me,” he bit out.

“I don’t want to live with you,” she told him. “I wouldn’t even shack up with Bruce; what makes you think I’d do it with you?”

“Shack up?” He repeated incredulously, “Who even says ‘shack up’ anymore?”

“My dad and I do,” she told him. “While I have no problem with other people living together, sex is one thing and co-habitation is another. I don’t play house, Oliver.”

“I’m not suggesting we play house, I’m asking you to live with me,” he scowled.

“You’re not asking anything, you’re telling, and I’m saying ‘no,’” she returned.

“Is it just me or did you guys notice that we stepped into a mirror universe? I could have sworn Oliver and I already had this conversation only I was him and he was you,” Laurel said with a hint of sarcasm. She turned to Felicity, “If he has a brother show up out of the blue, do yourself a favor and don’t get on the boat.”

Oliver’s jaw tightened as if he were biting back a scathing reply, “Fine, I’ll get you an apartment or buy you a new house! Hell, we can just take the jet to Vegas and get married right now if you don’t want to ‘live in sin’ with me, but we’re going home together.”

“I didn’t say anything about living in sin, I said ‘shacked up’,“ she told him. “In other words, ‘roommates with benefits’ which is something I don’t do. I don’t need marriage but I do need to be in
a relationship with someone who respects me before I agree to live with them.”

“I respect you,” he objected.

“No, you don’t!” She told him. “You’re here telling me what I will and won’t do like I’m some kind of obedient little dishrag. Last time Bruce tried that shit on me I wound up jumping out of the car in the middle of traffic, but since this is my house you can be the one to step off instead!”

“So I don’t respect you even though I flew all this way to get you back but you’re marrying a man who abandoned you four years ago and who you jumped out of a moving vehicle just to get away from?” He returned. “And I told you that if you want to take this slow, fine; I’ll get you another house,” he told her. “I’ll buy up every single house in your old neighborhood if that’s what it takes! I’ll even back off and give you room, but you are coming home.”

“It wasn’t a moving vehicle, I can get my own house, and as for a relationship, fast or slow Oliver, housebreaking one asshole vigilante was enough for me, thanks; frankly, I have put too many hours into Bruce to start all over again with you!”

“Is that your only reason for staying?” Laurel asked her.

“Well, there is the fact that Bruce has always been pretty up front and honest with me about his feelings and tends to back up what he says for better or for worse even if he can be a complete dick at times,” she told her. “Unlike some people,” she added, shooting Oliver a dirty look. “I mean about backing things up; you can definitely be just as big a dickhead as Bruce, trust me.”

“I am being up front and honest, you just aren’t listening to me!” He shot back.

“The honesty thing’s a bonus,” Laurel said in a conversational tone as both women ignored a now fuming Oliver. “Besides, you can’t really hold the whole stubborn manpain thing against them; all men can be asses but masks are ten times worse.”

“To be fair, Bruce is a special kind of ass even for a mask; like the epitome of asshole-ishness at times, but he’s at least consistent with it.”

“Got that right,” Oliver muttered. “Now if the two of you are done, I--”

“Okay, so how is he better than Ollie?” Laurel asked, cutting him off.

“What?” He said sharply.

“Other than the honesty and consistency part; what else?” She corrected.

Felicity frowned thoughtfully, “Well, in addition to being more consistent and honest, he expresses his emotions even when you really would prefer he didn’t and, not to be shallow, but he does kind of give better cookie…of course, that might just be because I was nervous when I was with…” she cut her eyes towards Oliver. “It was still a really great cookie though. Double stuffed,” she added.

“Really?” Laurel asked in surprise.

“What the hell is a cookie?” Oliver scowled as he looked from one woman to the other.

“Wait, better than every different kind of cookie you’ve ever had or just better than Ollie’s cookie?” She asked.

“Better than Ollie, what?” He demanded. “What’s a cookie?”
“I’ve only ever been with him and Oliver so…” She said, allowing her voice to trail off.

“You’re kidding,” Laurel said baldly.

“About which part?” She asked her.

Oliver’s head whipped between them with a thunderous expression, “Wait, are you two seriously talking about sex? In front of me? You’re comparing me to Wayne while I’m here in the same room?”

“Both,” Laurel told her as she pretended not to hear him, “but especially the cookie part. Ollie pretty much has that down to a science.”

“Goddamn it, what the fuck is a cookie?” He said angrily.

At that moment the doorbell rang, “I’ll get it,” Felicity said getting up from the couch.

Oliver got up and followed her past the living room into the foyer, “What the hell is a ‘cookie’?”

“Let it go, Oliver.”

“No, I’m not letting it go,” he reached out and stopped her by putting his hand on her shoulder then cutting her off by getting in front of her and blocking her path. “Do you honestly expect me to believe that all of this is just about sex to you; that what we shared that night was just physical?” He demanded. “I know you better than that, Felicity; it wasn’t just a screw, we made love that night—both of us.”

She paused, noting that Laurel had stayed behind on the couch, “It wasn’t just about sex for me, you’re right about that, but *we* weren’t making love,” she told him.

“How?” He demanded.

She glanced at the door then back at Oliver, knowing he wouldn’t let her go until she answered him, “It means that while I was making love *with* you, you were making love *to* me. Same thing down in the Cave.”

“I was making love *to* you?” He repeated angrily.

She took a centering breath, “Oliver, somewhere in your past you decided along the way that sex was a tool, a means to an end, but you don’t really enjoy it, do you?” She asked him. “You get pleasure from it, yes, but you don’t really feel it. You weren’t actually in the moment; I don’t know where you were, but you weren’t there with me.”

“Are you saying you didn’t enjoy it when I made love to you because we both know that’s a lie,” he said in a low growl. “And, rest assured, ‘Baby’,” his tongue curled around her nickname in a way that was both dangerous and so filled with sexual heat that it was almost filthy, “I was completely in the moment.”

“Oh, I enjoyed it,” she assured him calmly. “I didn’t enjoy it when Sara told me about your ‘routine’ and described almost perfectly what we did together then told me that you’d done the same thing with pretty much every other woman you’ve ever been with. It made me feel like I could have been anybody, Oliver; that you were just having sex with a warm body, not making love with me.”

“Me being with you that night wasn’t ‘routine’,,” he spat out. “Maybe I’m the one who should be questioning you since this whole thing has come to the point where you’re having to compare my
“Maybe you should,” she told him.

He stepped forward, gripping her upper arm tightly but not painfully, “I made love to you, Felicity, not to any other woman and not just because I wanted to get off, and you made love to me back. That night wasn’t about sex for me.”

“No, it was about control,” she told him. “It was about watching me fall apart while keeping your own emotions locked up tight because you knew from the minute you stepped over my threshold how that night was going to end.”

“That’s bullshit,” he said in a low voice even though they were far enough away from Laurel that she would have to strain to hear them.

“You knew the minute you found yourself bypassing my security protocols and entering my home uninvited that we were going to wind up in bed together.”

His jaw tightened and he looked away for a second before turning back to her, “I knew I wanted you, that doesn’t mean that I planned to end things between us like that.”

“But you didn’t come there to ask me to stay either,” she said.

His mouth tensed and he ran his hand over it before turning away for a moment. The doorbell rang again and she moved to answer it when he clamped his hand around her arm again, holding her in place, “Okay, fine; yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, I…” he paused as the phone began to ring then stopped as Laurel presumably picked up. He closed his eyes, “I came over to your house that night knowing that I wanted to make love with you but I never expected to go as far as we did.”

“But you still knew beforehand that, even if we did have sex, you were going to tell me go to Gotham afterwards.” It wasn’t a question. “You said, ‘I can’t let you go now’, meaning that, until that moment, that was your plan.”

His mouth opened but before he could answer, Laurel walked towards them saying, “You know, when that bell sounds, it generally means someone is asking to be let in.”

“Can you get the door, Laurel?” Felicity said and motioned for Oliver to follow her as she led him towards the study.

“Might as well, it’s my apartment after all,” the other woman said with a hint of a smile as she walked to the door. Neither Oliver nor Felicity noticed however as they both headed straight for the study, closing the door behind them.

“It wasn’t that calculating,” Oliver said without preamble as soon as the door shut behind him. “I wasn’t…I didn’t…fuck!” He ran his hand over his hair, “Why are you doing this?” He asked her, his expression pained. “It wasn’t too long ago that we were on the phone and I was telling you I loved you and you told me that you wanted to come home and that I was your best friend. What changed? What did I do to make you hate me this much?”

“I don’t hate you,” Felicity said as her fingers stroked the carved bronzed feathers of the statuette, tripping lightly over the bent tail feathers and rubbing against the many nicks and dings the prop
suffered over the years. Beautiful but flawed, she thought as an aside. Those words were slowly becoming something of a mantra for her.

“Then why?” He asked her. “I’m trying Felicity, I really am, but you need to let me in. You love me—”

“I do,” she said, her fingers finding a chip in the bronze as she refused to look him in the eye. “But I love him, too and I can’t keep…”

“Can’t keep what?” He asked, taking a step towards her.

She swallowed back tears as she looked at him at last, “I can’t love both of you, Oliver. It’s tearing me apart and I have to choose because I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in limbo.”

“So choose me,” he said quietly as he neared her, his thumb casting over her cheek bone as he tilted her head towards him. “Love me.”

“You’re not ready—”

“Then come be with me until I am ready,” he told her. “I’m damaged, broken, I’ve made a hell of a lot of mistakes and I don’t deserve you but you’ve always been able to fix me, Felicity. You’ve never given up on me before, don’t give up on me now.”

She took a deep breath, “Fine, you win,” she said at last. “I’ll do it; I’ll leave Bruce and come home with you.” He smiled, his mouth dipping towards hers but she stopped him by placing her fingers on his lips, “But first you need to decide if that’s really what you want.”

“It is,” he said immediately, resting his forehead against hers, “It is, just come home.”

“I can only love one of you at a time, Oliver,” she told him, her fingers reaching up to stroke the soft, short hairs behind his ears as she had done with the statuette. “I can be in love with Bruce or I can be in love with you, but I can’t be in love with both of you. It hurts too much.” Her voice broke slightly and she cleared her throat, “I want to love one of you with all of my heart and as long as it was just Bruce, or just you, I could do that. I could spend the rest of my life with Bruce and be happy, not perfectly happy, but close enough. He offered me a home, a life, a chance to be real and seen. He always saw me, Oliver.” She lifted her head and looked at him through tear filled eyes, “No one else ever saw me before Bruce.” The tears began to fall, first held suspended on her eyelashes before trailing with crystalline perfection down her cheek. “People outside of my family hardly ever even spoke to me. I was an embarrassment, a reminder of something dirty and distasteful, so people always looked through me but Bruce never did. Even when I was a little girl he spoke to me like I mattered.”

“You matter,” he whispered, his thumb wiping away her tears as his lips brushed against her cheek. “You’ve always mattered to me; always.”

She pulled away again just enough so that she could look at him, “Even when he hurt me he never forgot me. You can’t understand what that means, Oliver. You can’t know what it’s like to feel invisible and then have someone really see you for the first time. You made me feel like that the first time you walked in my office at QC. You saw me and I fell in love with you.” His lips descended towards hers but she pressed her hand against his chest to stop him, “But you haven’t always seen me.”

“I see you,” he said, frowning slightly. “I see you, I do; I always have.”

“Now; now you see me because you want me or you need me, but what happens when you don’t?”
She asked him. He opened his mouth to speak but she cut him off, “We both know that you aren’t ready for this, but I’ll still go with you because I do love you and I can’t not love you as long as you’re here, I don’t have the strength to fight it. That said we both know that there will be some other big bad around the corner, some other pain that cuts into you so deep you push me away for my own good. And, as much as you want to say it won’t happen, we both know there will be moments of weakness where you flirt with another woman in order to test me because that’s what you do.”

“I would never cheat on you,” he said firmly. “That was the old me before the island; not once have I cheated on anyone since I’ve been back. Even when I was caught between Sara and Laurel it was either one or the other, not both.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But we both know that you compartmentalize your feelings, you do it to protect yourself, but when you strike out at the people you love you don’t do it with your fists. You use your feelings like you use Arrows for the mission, and when you strike out, you cut deep. I know that being with you isn’t a sure thing, that I could be waiting for years before you’re ready. It may take ten years or twenty, and there will be times when you stop seeing me because you already have. The first time Slade came for us, you would go days, even weeks without speaking to me except to issue an order. When Sara first arrived you stopped seeing me altogether because she filled every corner of your mind not occupied by the mission. When Laurel was in your life, it was the same thing, then Slade again...”

“I told you why I did that,” he said in a voice laced with pain and aggravation.

“I know,” she told him not unkindly, her hand resting against his cheek. “I know and I never stopped loving you, not once; I understood each and every time, but things were different then. I could deal with being invisible because I wasn’t really part of your world then.”

“You were always part of my world,” he told her quietly. “From day one you were the center of my universe.”

“Maybe, but you weren’t really part of mine,” she said softly, “not in the beginning. You weren’t the only one hiding or compartmentalizing their feelings. I kept my life, this life, secret because I needed that distance in order to do what I had to do. I wasn’t ever afraid of dying, Oliver. The blood bothered me but it didn’t scare me off. I would walk through hell for you if that’s what it took, but once I let down those walls there isn’t anything left, do you understand? You’re asking me to go into this blind, knowing I’m going to be hurt over and over while you figure things out, and I’ll do it; for you I’ll take the hit, but when you finally do figure it out...” She bit her lip, “I’m not the Felicity I was when you came into that office and smiled at me for the first time. You know better than anyone that pain has a way of changing you.”

“So what are you saying,” he asked, looking deeply into her eyes.

“What I’m saying is that by the time you’re ready to accept the woman I am now into your life, she won’t be me anymore. I’m saying that I can’t go into stasis for you, I can’t stop moving forward,” she told him. “Bruce loves me now--”

“I love you now,” he said angrily.

“But will you love me ten years from now when you’re finally ready to have that life you promised me?”

He moved away from her, pacing slightly, his hand rubbing over his mouth in agitation before turning back towards her, his posture stiff, “Do you love me or not? Do you want to be with me, yes or no?” He demanded.
“I would spend the rest of my life with you, Oliver,” she told him quietly. “However long that is, I will love you. Even if you leave and we never see each other again, I will always love you, but I can’t make you love me and I can’t let you make promises you can’t keep. All I can do is offer you the same deal I offered Bruce.”

“And what’s that?” He asked with a hint of anger.

She took a centering breath and smoothed her hands down her stomach before speaking, “If you want me then I’ll be with you but I won’t marry you and I won’t have children with you; not now, maybe not ever because I won’t bring a life into this world if I can’t be sure he or she will have two parents who will be there for them. I won’t live with you, I won’t work for you, and I won’t be acknowledged publically as your girlfriend. Our relationship will be kept private and between just the two of us and the team since we can’t really hide it anymore.”

“That’s bullshit,” he burst out.

“No, it’s not,” she told him. “If something goes south then I need to be allowed to walk away without having to deal with the fallout of a public breakup; I deserve the right to protect my dignity and not have my personal life discussed around the water cooler or bandied about on the front pages of the gossip rags. Instead, I’ll love you behind closed doors and I won’t keep you a prisoner. I won’t stay where I’m not wanted and I won’t make you stay with me. If you try, I’ll leave. If you fall in love with someone else, I’ll let you go, but you have to let me go back. Don’t make me stay and watch that happen; don’t make me into Laurel or Moira. I won’t force you to make a commitment but, if you do, I won’t stay once you cheat.”

“I would never—I asked you to marry me, goddamn it!” He scowled.

“And I’m saying no,” she said simply. “Marriage is a promise, Oliver. It’s the biggest promise a person can make and I don’t break my promises. I’m giving you everything I am, I’m letting you in all the way, but I have to keep something for myself if I’m going to survive because, as much as I love you, I know that you aren’t really ready to love me and being with you now comes at a cost.”

He winced, his eyes dropping to the floor, “What do you want me to say?”

“Nothing,” she told him. “The only thing I want from you is not to make me any promises. Don’t tell me you love me, don’t ask me to be your wife. Don’t promise me children or a future. The only promise I want from you is that you’ll let me go when the time comes and you won’t come after me when you start feeling guilty, because we both know that’s going to happen.”

“How do you know that’s what’s going to happen?” He challenged, “No one knows that, I don’t know that!”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “Maybe I’m wrong and our life will be as close to perfect as it can ever be but that’s not the most likely scenario, is it?” She closed her eyes before speaking again, “I know I have to choose, Oliver; I know I can’t have both of you but I’m not strong enough to keep fighting this. I can’t keep feeling like I’m being pulled in two different directions like this so I’m asking you, I’m begging you, to make that decision for me.” She opened her eyes again, her eyes meeting his calmly, “Either love me or let me go; let me stay here and be with Bruce if you aren’t sure what it is you want, but if you’re sure, if you really do want this, then I’ll come with you and I won’t look back.”

“I can’t--” He clenched his jaw tightly, “I can’t let you go but I can’t…”

She stepped toward him and laid her hand on his cheek before tilting her head up and brushing her
lips on his. He made a low groaning sound and turned to her more fully, his hand burying itself in her hair as he kissed her, his tongue stroking against hers.

She allowed the kiss to continue, breathed in his scent and his taste until he released her. When they broke apart, his forehead again resting against hers, she ran her fingers through his hair, eyes still closed, and said, “After this business with Isabel is settled you need to go home and let me go.” He pulled away with a start but she didn’t release him. With surprising strength she held him there, her eyes never leaving his, “I’m letting you go, Oliver; I’m doing this because I love you and because I know you love me.”

“I can’t do that,” he told her. “Felicity…”

She let go of him and moved away, “I’m asking you, please; just go.”

“What if you’re wrong,” he asked her, “What if I’m ready now?”

“Are you?” She asked him simply. When he didn’t answer her, she nodded, “You can’t stay here tonight. Bruce said that Alfred was going to put you up at the manor instead.”

“What if I don’t want to stay at Wayne’s house?” He asked her, his eyes glittering dangerously.

“Then call a realtor and buy a condo or bribe someone into giving you a suite at the Ritz because, if you stay here, then it’s just a matter of time before you and I wind up in bed together and I can’t hurt Bruce or myself like that.”

“That’s not exactly giving me an incentive to leave,” he told her.

“I wouldn’t survive it,” she told him simply. “If you make me into that person, the kind of person who could do that to someone they loved and who they made a commitment to, then you might as well just put an arrow in me. I’d wind up choking on the guilt and I’d never be able to look myself in the mirror afterwards.”

His eyes filled with regret and he swallowed, “I’ll leave but I won’t give up on us.”

“You should,” she told him. “I wish you would. As much as it would hurt to see you move on, I want you to be happy even if it’s without me.”

“I can’t.” He gave her another long look, “I won’t push you anymore but I’m not leaving until this Orbital thing is done. After that, if you’re still with Wayne…” he paused, “If you still want to stay here then I’ll let you go.”

She turned to the door and placed her hand on it before turning toward him slightly, “Thank you.”

“You shouldn’t marry him,” Oliver said as she moved to open it. “Even if you aren’t willing to come with me now, don’t marry him.”

She opened her mouth to say something but thought better of it and merely opened the door and headed out instead.

Felicity walked into the living room without turning her head even though Oliver was close at her heels. She did her best, said what she needed to say, but she knew Oliver well enough to know that if you fought him on something it would only make him dig in his heels.
She wasn’t lying; she was tired of being torn between the two of them and she would go with Oliver if he really needed her, but he didn’t. Laurel was right; going back with him would be the same as enabling him and Oliver needed to heal. He needed to find some balance with his mission and get his son back before he began a new life. Her being there would just give him one more excuse not to confront the broken shards of his life. He was still running, towards her yes, but running nonetheless. The only person who could fix Oliver was Oliver and if she continued down that path she’d be doing more harm than good.

Would she marry Bruce? Right now she couldn’t think about that; she just needed to get past — “Whoa.”

She stopped so quickly, Oliver nearly ran into her from behind.

“What is that?” She asked faintly as she pointed to the massive animal standing in front of her.

“Hello Miss Felicity,” Alfred said, turning from Laurel to face her and Oliver. “Master Bruce said you wanted a dog so he asked me to bring Titus by.”

“Big,” was all Felicity could get out. The massive black Great Dane stared back at her, it’s head at chest height and it easily outweighed her by a good seventy pounds.

“Yes, he is rather,” Alfred admitted. “But he is quite well trained and gentle. When you mentioned to Master Bruce that you wanted a companion he immediately called me and asked me to bring him over.”

“When I said I wanted a dog I was thinking about a miniature poodle or a Lhasa Apso, maybe some kind of small mixed breed or one of those bug eyed dogs with the curly tails and the smooshed in faces…” she said faintly. “That’s…he’s…*big*. This is a big place but it’s still an apartment.”

“Oh, not to worry,” he assured her. “He’s quite laid back and docile. As for his other needs, I’ve already spoken with security. They’ll have one of their guards come by several times a day to walk him and the workmen should be here within the hour to install a doggie door.”

“Doggie door?” She repeated.

“That’s going to be kind of a big door,” Laurel said eyeing the animal as well.

“Yes, well, I have some gardeners coming this afternoon to lay down some sod tracks in the rooftop garden so that Titus can see to his own needs if necessary. As for the pet door, it isn’t the usual plastic flap. One of Master Bruce’s companies developed it; the door contains sensors that pick up a signal given off by a microchip embedded between the dog’s shoulder blades so that only he can come and go through it. It unlocks to allow him to exit then bolts itself shut and is designed to keep out the chill. It’s quite safe,” he assured her. “The bullet proof screen around the roof is more than tall enough to prevent Titus from having an accident on the off chance the door fails to open for him and they’re also bringing him a lovely little dog house that is temperature controlled as well.”

“That’s good,” Felicity said with a cringe. “I mean, it’s not like dogs can fly so…yeah. Where did—?”

“Titus,” Alfred supplied.

“Where did Titus come from exactly?” She asked him. “I mean, you didn’t run out to the breeder this morning, did you?”

“No,” he told her, a hint of melancholy creeping into his expression. “Titus was Master Damian’s
Master Bruce purchased him for the boy to help teach him…”

“Empathy,” she supplied.

“Yes.” His eyes grew very sad at that, “It was quite successful actually. Damian cared for Titus very much. In fact, at times I think the dog was the only thing that truly made him happy.”

She felt a wave of sadness wash over her. It didn’t matter that Damian thought about killing her, she forgave him the instant Bruce told her about it. After hearing his story from both Bruce and Tim, disturbed as Damian was, as far as she was concerned he was the real victim in the end. She knew what loneliness felt like and she couldn’t help but wonder if she had been there if she could have helped him in some small way. At least the dog was proof that, even though Bruce and Tim called him a monster, there was still a little boy in there somewhere.

She looked at the dog who stared back at her silently, “Can I…pet him?”

“Certainly,” Alfred told her. “He’s a bit reserved around strangers though, so don’t be--”

She approached the dog and he gave a tiny yip then began wagging his tail enthusiastically as she stroked her fingers over his shiny black fur. He sat down on his haunches and pawed the air at her, his head falling back playfully as his tongue lolled out of his mouth.

“Hello,” she said, bending down so they were closer in height. “Aren’t you a good boy,” she said with a smile.

“Hmm,” Alfred said, his eyebrows raised in surprise, “he’s not usually this receptive to new people.”

“Why did Bruce name him ‘Titus’?” She asked as she scratched the dog behind the ears causing him to groan in pleasure. “I thought he always called his dogs ‘Ace’?”

“Ace? I don’t get it,” Laurel said, approaching them and petting the dog as well whose tail began swishing back and forth even harder at the prospect of a second person paying him attention.

“All of Bruce’s dogs were called ‘Ace’,,” she chuckled. “Even other people’s pets; it doesn’t matter what their names are, he calls every dog he meets ‘Ace’.”

“That’s weird,” Laurel said with a snort.

“It’s Bruce,” she said simply.

“Indeed,” Alfred said with an indulgent smile. “It comes from the fact that Master Bruce’s father had a Dane when he was a boy and named it ‘Ace’. He died shortly after his parents were killed and Master Bruce had his remains interred at the foot of Mr. Wayne’s grave with a marker. Since then, whenever he has a dog, he names it so as a way of honoring both his father and the original Ace.”

“And they’re always Danes,” Felicity finished for him. “Sometimes it’s a mixed breed, but always with some Dane in there somewhere. I guess I should have known better than to expect him to get me a poodle, huh?”

“So where did ‘Titus’ come from?” Laurel asked.

“Master Damian named him Titus after the Shakespeare play ‘Titus Andronicus’,,” Alfred began.

“Seriously,” Laurel said flatly. At Oliver’s look of confusion she explained, “It’s Shakespeare’s bloodiest play and it’s filled with murder, rape, revenge, dismemberment, cannibalism, and torture.”
“And Wayne let his kid read that?” Oliver said with a frown.

“Master Damian was a rather…precocious child,” Alfred said with an uncomfortable grimace. “In any case, Master Bruce still merely refers to the dog as ‘Ace’ and the dog is clever enough to answer to both.”

“You are such a smart boy, aren’t you?” Felicity cooed at him, still on her knees and petting the dog who was now leaning heavily against her and panting happily.

“If you don’t wish to keep Titus, I’m sure Master Bruce will understand,” he assured her. “However, he really is quite well trained and highly protective of his charges.”

“No, that’s fine,” Felicity said with a chuckle as Titus licked her cheek. “As long as you’re sure he’ll be okay staying here by himself sometimes?”

“Absolutely Miss,” he nodded. “I already called the pet store and they’ll be delivering treats, grooming necessities, as well as his regular food and a set of automatic feeders in case you’re gone for an extended period of time.”

Oliver, who had been standing back listening with a disgruntled look on his face, reached out his hand to pet the dog as well. The animal tensed as his hand neared him and began to growl low in his throat. “It’s definitely Wayne’s dog, alright,” he said dryly as he pulled back his hand.

“We were just about to go out to run some errands; will he be okay alone?” She asked him. “Tam’s coming with the decorators soon…?”

“I’ll remain behind until they get here,” he assured her. “I have some errands to run myself so I’ll leave once everything’s been delivered. Titus is quite used to being left to his own devices, I assure you.”

“Does he get along with other animals?” Laurel asked him. “Like, say, cats?”

“He does, yes,” Alfred told her with a hint of surprise. “He gets on quite well with the gardener’s cat, in fact.”

“Did you want to get a cat?” Felicity asked her.

Laurel bit her lip and gave her a sheepish look, “I mean, I wouldn’t want to impose…”

“No, Sara wanted a cat,” she told her. “We could stop by the shelter or look at some pet stores while we’re out. Maybe we could buy Ace some toys or something as well.”

“Ace, huh? Not Titus?” Laurel asked her.

“He just looks like an Ace to me,” Felicity said as she stroked the dog’s soft ears.

“He does, doesn’t he?” Laurel said with a grin. “You’re a good boy Ace, huh?” She praised him causing the massive dog’s tail to thump against the floor even harder.

Oliver cleared his throat after casting a less than pleased eye over the dog and their continued affections towards it, “If we’re going to go then we should get a move on, don’t you think?”

“Ah yes, Mr. Queen, I have rooms already prepared for you at the mansion and I thought that perhaps since you are in town you would like to assist Master Dick on patrol later,” the elder gentleman suggested.
“Maybe later, for now I was planning on going with Felicity to--”

“You can’t come, Oliver,” Felicity said, getting to her feet and brushing off her sweater. “I have eyes on me, remember? Actually, Dick can’t come with us either. I shouldn’t be seen with any masks outside of Orbital until we figure things out.”

“She’s right, sir,” Alfred told him as he held out a set of keys, “I thought you might need a vehicle so I borrowed one of the cars from the garage for you to use. It’s parked next to the entrance to the private elevator in the parking garage.”

Oliver accepted the keys reluctantly, “I don’t feel comfortable letting you two go into the dealership alone with a car full of bullet holes.”

“The dealership?” Alfred asked in alarm. “I was under the impression that we were to take it through the tunnels back to the main Batcave?”

“I have it handled,” she assured the older gentleman. “That reminds me—hold on,” she said, taking out her tablet and retrieving the pictures Renee took so she could add them to the police report on the GCPD server then hurried into the study to grab the pages she printed out.

She came out a few seconds later with a manila folder and grabbed her purse then slipped on her boots that were next to the couch. She shoved the folder into her leather messenger bag along with her tablet before turning to Alfred, “Can you tell Tam to call me when she gets here? Laurel is going to be living with us as well and she needs to hold off on doing anything except the basics to that bedroom until they talk.”

“Of course, Miss,” he said easily.

“There’s some muffins and things in the kitchen but not much else, I’m afraid,” she said as Laurel slipped on her shoes as well and grabbed her own bag.

“I’ll be fine,” he assured her.

At that moment the group walked through the door led by Dick who took one look at the dog and arched his eyebrow in surprise, “What’s Titus doing here?”

“Master Bruce wanted Miss Felicity to have a companion to keep her company at night until he returns from his business trip,” Alfred told him. “In the meantime, I have given Mr. Queen the keys to the Jaguar and invited him to help you with your patrols later. Also, I have readied both of you rooms at the manor. I suggest that you retrieve your belongings and accompany Mr. Queen home to show him around the Batcave. After I’ve completed my business here in town I’ll join you there.”

“Bruce wants Oliver to stay at the manor and work out of the Batcave?” Dick said dubiously.

“He insisted,” the elderly gentleman said with a slight nod.

“I’ll bet,” Oliver muttered.

“I thought we were returning the car so we could all go to jail together?” Luke said sarcastically.

“You aren’t going,” Felicity said firmly. “Laurel, Renee, and I have it handled.”


“Me, too,” Dick said.
“We’re being watched,” Laurel said with a sigh, taking the lead this time. “How do you think it will look if we’ve got Batman’s guys going grocery shopping with us? Besides, we can take care of ourselves!”

“That’s what we’re afraid of,” Dick said darkly.

“How about if I promise not to let them shoot up the joint this time?” Renee said sarcastically then looked down at the large dog. “Nice horse; that thing come with its own saddle?”

“Hey there big fella,” Wildcat said, coming forward to pat the dog on his flank as he stood to greet him. “Don’t sweat it, I’ll hang out with the girls. You guys want to take my truck?”

“You might want to take it in case you need an escape vehicle,” Dick said, his expression troubled.


“Just go with Oliver and Dick,” she told him before leaning up to give Alfred a kiss on the cheek. “Call me if you need anything, okay?”

Alfred patted her arm and offered her an affectionate smile, “I’ll be fine, my dear. And I’ll be sure to have your sister call as soon as she gets in.”

Laurel, Renee, and Wildcat headed towards the door but Oliver stepped in front of her before she could join them, “Hey, if anything goes wrong, call us.”

“We’ll be fine, I promise; I’ve got it covered,” she told him quietly, stepping around him and going through the door Renee held open for her.

“You boys have fun,” the other woman chuckled as she closed the door behind them.

As soon as the doors closed, Dick turned to Oliver, “Follow them?”

“Follow them,” he nodded.

“I stuck listening devices and trackers in their phones earlier and planted an extra tracker in the car,” Luke said in the same tone.

“I got the address to the dealership out of the glove box, just in case Felicity finds and disables them,” Dick added.

“Great, let’s give them a five minute head start then follow them,” Oliver said with a nod.

Alfred sighed, “I’ll be downstairs manning Watchtower, then. Come along, Titus,” he told the dog as they both headed towards the study.

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They were all bundled up with the heat on max but, by the time they got to the Mercedes dealership they were all half frozen.

“Now I really do wish I’d taken my truck,” Wildcat muttered from behind the wheel as he eased into the lot where several people stopped to stare as they passed.

“You do realize that the paint is still wet, right?” Renee said shivering.

“I know, all part of the plan,” she told them through chattering teeth.
“I wish I knew what the plan was,” the other woman muttered.

“I just want heat,” Laurel whined pitifully. “I don’t even care if I go to jail at this point as long as it’s warm there.”

Wildcat pulled into the shop and some mechanics met them as he rolled down his window.

“Uh, can we help you?” The young man in the coveralls asked, his eyes bugging out as he took in the state of the vehicle.

“Yes, can you go get your manager please?” Felicity asked him from the passenger seat.

“I’m getting out of the car and into the showroom,” Laurel told her. “If the cops come to arrest us I’ll be near the coffee pot.”

“I’m with her,” Renee said exiting the vehicle as well.

“Hey, let him know we’ll be waiting inside,” Wildcat called out to the mechanic as he shut off the engine and they both stepped out to join them.

A few minutes later the manager, and one of the mechanics came over to them, “Ms. Rochev?”

“Actually, it’s Ms. Fox,” Felicity said, offering him her hand.

He took it reluctantly, “Are you aware that there are bullet holes in your vehicle, Ms. Fox?”

“I am, yes,” she pulled out the folder and handed it to him, “As you might be aware, Ms. Rochev leased the vehicle for the Orbital Organization and I, as the Director of the Gotham branch, am authorized to use it. A few nights ago I went to get coffee, I heard a popping noise and, when I exited the shop, I saw that someone sprayed graffiti on the car. I immediately went inside and called the police, I didn’t even see the bullet holes at first.” She swept her hands up in a helpless gesture, “The police believe that they attempted to get in the trunk and tried to shoot the lock but something must have startled them.” She gave him an innocent and slightly dewy eyed look, “They said I’m lucky I waited to investigate until my order was ready or they might have shot me as well.”

“Oh my,” the older man said with a frown. “Is this the police report?”

“Yes sir,” she nodded. “As you can see, it’s all there. I was going to call you right after it happened but the police detective said to wait until they finished processing the vehicle so it could be released back to me then take you the report. I mistakenly thought that by ‘processed’ it meant they were going to clean the graffiti off but all they did was use that powder stuff like on television for fingerprints. Luckily it’s been very cold so the paint is still tacky. I was going to go to get it cleaned before I returned it, in fact we did get all that yellow stuff off of everything inside of it, but when I mentioned to Detective Bullock that I thought it would just come off in the carwash, he told me not to even try it. He said that I shouldn’t touch it since you guys have special paint removers to preserve the finish. I don’t really know much about cars…” she said a bit helplessly.

“No, he was absolutely correct to tell you that,” he nodded before looking up in confusion, “You said this happened outside of a coffee shop?”

“I know, believe me,” she cringed. “It sounds unbelievable but my regular coffee place is in kind of a bad neighborhood apparently.”

“That seems like every neighborhood these days,” the manager said grimly as he flipped through the report.
“This city is going to hell in a hand basket,” the mechanic commiserated beside him.

He paused at something written on the report and looked up at her, “It says here that this occurred near where those carjackers were arrested for shooting at someone last night. I heard on the news that they actually murdered a man with a tire iron after stealing his car just last week.”

“Really?” She said wide-eyed. “I hadn’t heard about that.”

“I heard that at that hotel last night, they tried going after a guy who was retired special forces and he wound up putting all three of them in the hospital instead. They say he shot one and ran the other two over in order to get away,” the mechanic added. “The news said that he’s wanted for questioning but, if you ask me, they ought to give that guy a medal.”

“You know, you are a very lucky young lady,” the manager said seriously. “It seems like you can’t go outside after dark these days without running into armed thugs or dangerous men in masks.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Renee said shaking her head.

“And you are…?” The manager asked looking towards her companions.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. This is my friend, Renee, and my cousin, Laurel,” she said introducing them with a slight tremble to her voice. “They’ve been staying with me ever since this happened. This whole thing has just been such a horrible experience and they’ve been so supportive…I assume this is covered by insurance?” She asked tentatively. “If not, I can pay for it myself. My fiancé is out of town but he gave me his card. I’m an authorized user but you can call him if need be.” She sniffled slightly and pulled a tissue out of her pocket to dab at her dry eyes, “This has just been so upsetting. I haven’t slept in days just thinking about what could have happened and now I find out someone actually *died*.” She took a shaky breath, “I’m so sorry, I probably look a mess.”

“That’s alright, my dear,” the older man said with a smile as he reached for her hand and patted it gently. “We’ll call the adjustor ourselves and have this taken care of, no need to trouble yourself any further. In the meantime, I looked up your records and found that you have a car replacement clause so you can pick something else out. Did you have an idea of what you may want? Perhaps a similar vehicle to the one you had?”

“Got any tanks?” Wildcat said dryly.

“This is my Uncle Teddy,” Felicity said with a bright and slightly vacuous smile as she looped her arm through his. “He worries. He hasn’t left my side since this happened and insisted on driving me because I’ve just been in an absolute state!”

“As well he should, young lady; this is a dangerous city. Why, if you were my niece or daughter I wouldn’t let you out of my sight either, not with criminals roaming the streets and shooting at people’s cars,” the older man said sternly before turning to Wildcat. “Did you have something in mind for your niece, sir?”

“Uh…” he said with a frown.

“Something roomy and comfortable, right Uncle Teddy?” She said, blinking up at Wildcat then turned to the manager. “But nothing fancy. Ms. Rochev picked this vehicle last time and I’d rather have something more practical instead.”

“Of course; what other features did you have in mind, dear heart?” He asked with a slightly patronizing look on his face.
“Something…?” She bit her lip as though thinking about it carefully.

“Bulletproof,” Renee offered from behind her causing Laurel to snort into her hand.

“With a cattle bumper,” Wildcat added.

“I was going to say something safe,” Felicity said, cutting her eyes towards them.

“All of our vehicles are very safe,” he told her. “They’re rated highest in industry safety standards.”

“I’m just a little reluctant to get back in such an expensive vehicle,” she said with a hint of vulnerability. “I thought I saw some other cars on the lot; maybe a Toyota or a Honda? Something that won’t be as big a target to thieves.”

“There is that minivan on the south lot,” the mechanic suggested.

The manager nodded. “The wife of the owner had a Honda Odyssey customized for her use but changed her mind and decided to get an SUV instead when their daughter began equestrian lessons. They needed the additional towing capacity,” he explained. “It’s a Touring Elite edition, fully loaded and very roomy. I don’t know if you’d be interested in that sort of vehicle though.”

“May I see it?” She asked him.

“You want a minivan?” Renee asked dubiously.

“I wouldn’t mind looking at it,” she shrugged. “Besides, now that I have Ace I kind of need something big.”

“Ace?” The manager asked.

“He’s my new dog; a Great Dane,” she explained. “My Uncle Teddy bought him for me today. He wanted to get me a big dog for protection given how dangerous the city has become.”

“A wise choice, sir, wise choice indeed,” the manager said, giving Wildcat an approving look.

“Anything for my little baby-doll,” he said, his eyes dancing with amusement.

“I was hoping to find something comfortable in case I needed to take him with me to the vet or something,” she told him. “After what you told me I’m even thinking of taking him to work with me. I don’t even know how I’m ever going to leave my apartment by myself ever again! Like I said, this has just been so surreal,” she said wide-eyed. “Nothing like this has ever happened to me before.”

Laurel and Renee both began to sputter and the manager turned to them in concern, “Are you both alright?”

Laurel snorted then cleared her throat, “Fine. Excuse me; I think I might have caught a chill,” she muttered.

Renee began choking into her fist as well, “Yeah, I think I’m coming down with it myself.”

“That’s quite all right; it seems like there’s a bug going around. My wife has been miserable all week, especially with all the storms we’ve been having lately,” he told them. “As for you, young lady, you happen to be in luck,” he told her. “The manager’s wife bred dogs and was very active in the Kennel Club so she ordered all weather floor and cargo mats as well as customized seat covers.” He turned to the mechanic, “Can you have someone drive it up here so the young lady can look at it?”
“Thank you,” Felicity said warmly. “You’ve been so kind.”

“Not at all, Ms. Fox,” he said, patting her hand again.

“Felicity,” she told him with a sweet smile as she looked at him through her eyelashes.

“Felicity, what a lovely name and it suits you,” he said, his own smile broadening in response. “I don’t think I formally introduced myself; I’m Leland Agnew, the general manager. Please call me Lee, I insist.”

“Thank you, Lee,” she said with a hint of bashfulness then shivered. “Oh, I may be coming down with a bit of a chill myself, I think.”

“Let’s get you warm then,” he said with a concerned frown. “Why don’t you all come wait in my office and we’ll fill out the paperwork while my assistant gets you some coffee and pastries,” he said taking her arm and leading them towards the back.

“I’ll be damned,” Wildcat muttered in admiration as he trailed behind them.

“Unbelievable,” Renee said turning to the woman next to her.

“I told you; the girl is catnip,” Laurel said with a smile.

All three men sat in the car across the lot exchanging glances as they listened to their conversation.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Dick said incredulously.

“A coffee shop?” Luke said wrinkling his brow in consternation. “He bought that? Where did she even come up with that lame-ass cover story in the first place? Who says ‘my car got shot while I was getting coffee’?”

Oliver cleared his throat but said nothing.

“In a bad neighborhood, no less,” Dick added shaking his head. “Oh, and even though the paint is still wet it’s because of the weather. We’re just lucky we didn’t put money on her odds or she would have cleaned us out.”

“And he never even questioned it; he just said, ‘Okay, go pick something else. And, by the way, can I get you a Danish?’ I can’t believe he bought that,” Luke said in disbelief. “Seriously, who would buy that?”

“You’d be surprised,” Oliver said, rubbing the bridge of his nose wearily. “Can we just go to Wayne’s place now? I think they’ve got it covered. Besides, I’d rather not be here when she starts talking about sports drinks in syringes and they find plans to rob an armored truck on the key fob.”


“Never mind, just drive.”

Alfred rang the doorbell and waited.

“Hello?” The diminutive Asian woman said as she opened the door, her still lovely features glowing
as she caught sight of him, “Oh, Mr. Alfred,” she said, a faint blush lighting her cheeks as she patted her already perfectly coifed salt and pepper hair. “What are you doing here?”

Alfred smiled, as he looked at her in appreciation, “Mrs. Hu, you look lovely as always.”

She laughed nervously, the deepening color in her cheeks making his eyes dance with amusement, “Thank you, Mr. Alfred; won’t you please come in? Lucius is gone on business but perhaps I could offer you some tea and some oatmeal cookies? I just finished taking them out of the oven.”

“That would be lovely,” he said, crossing the threshold. “And please, just call me ‘Alfred’,” he told her.

“Alright Alfred,” she said slightly giddily. “And you must call me Peggy Ann.”

“Peggy Ann then,” he said smoothly as he bent slightly at the waist to take her hand and kiss the air just above her knuckles, grinning when the elderly woman looked like she might actually swoon. “Actually, I came here to speak with you if that’s all right.”

“Yes!” She said brightly then cleared her throat, “I mean, yes, that would be fine. May I take your coat?” He nodded and handed it to her, watching as she carefully hung it in the nearby closet before leading him into the kitchen. “Please sit,” she said, indicating the barstools at the counter then busied herself with preparing the tea. He waited patiently as she fixed his cup, remembering without even having to ask exactly how he took it and adding a few cookies to a plate before setting it in front of him. “What is it you wanted to talk to me about, Alfred?” She asked, blushing again as she said his name with a slightly drawn out inflection.

Charming, utterly charming, he thought as he admired her once again, her slight accent adding to her beauty despite her advanced years. “Actually, I have a bit of a problem and I need your expertise to help solve it,” he told her, taking a sip of the tea and making an appreciative noise. “Wonderful; did you blend this yourself?”

“Yes,” she said with a hint of pride. “I have an extra canister if you would like to take some home with you?”

“Yes, please,” he nodded. “Actually tea is why I’m here. Do you have a cutting board and a pair of scissors I may borrow for a moment?”

“Oh, certainly,” she said with a hint of confusion but quickly retrieved the objects he asked for. As soon as she set down the wooden cutting board and handed him the scissors, he took the packet of herbs out of his jacket pocket and snipped the sachet open before carefully pouring them out onto the board. “An associate of Mr. Wayne’s was traveling recently and he found this extraordinary tea in China. He said that, as far as he knows, it only grows on one island and has miraculous healing properties. Mr. Wayne is interested in finding out more about them as he’s always interested in adding to his already vigorous health regimen. I tried identifying the various herbs myself but I’m afraid phytology isn’t an area I have a lot of expertise in. However, I immediately thought of you as I know you are quite knowledgeable in such matters.”

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“You’ve heard so, yes,” he agreed, watching her carefully as she reached into a drawer for a pair of ceramic chopsticks.
She began to pick through the herbs carefully, her frown deepening. “I recognize some of these: ginseng, willow bark, lotus root, Astragalus root; all of which traditionally support Qi but many of these I’ve never seen before.” She looked up at him inquisitively, “Where in China did you say this friend of Mr. Wayne’s found these?”

“A volcanic island some miles off the coast in the North China Sea,” he told her. “A place called ‘Lian Yu’.”

She paled, “Lian Yu?” She repeated.

“Yes, are you alright?” He asked in concern.

“I don’t know if I can help you,” she said, her eyes darting away from his furtively.

“Please, Mrs. Hu—Peggy Ann,” he corrected. He waited until she raised her eyes and offered her a gentle smile, “From what I’ve heard from others, this tea is really quite extraordinary. It has the potential to heal very serious injuries in a matter of days. I plan on having them taken to a lab as well to be analyzed, but…”

“No,” she told him. “You shouldn’t take this to a lab. If these are what I think they are, they won’t find anything.”

“What is it you think they are?” He asked, frowning as she bit her bottom lip. “Please.”

“I don’t know if I should…” she said faintly.

“Mrs. Hu, Master Bruce already consumed some of these. If he’s been poisoned…” he said in alarm.

“It’s not poisonous,” she assured him as she took a centering breath and smoothed her hands over her apron. “It’s just…you are a learned man and I don’t want to make a bad impression.”

“You could never make a bad impression, I assure you,” he said quietly. “I find you to be…quite charming actually.”

“Really?” She asked, her entire expression lighting up and causing him to reach out and take her hand in his.

“Really,” he said in an appreciative timbre.

She bit her bottom lip again and dropped her gaze shyly, “Very well, but just know that these are merely stories my father told me as a girl…”

“Stories?” He asked her curiously, his thumb casting gently over the fragile skin on the back of her hand and causing her to move closer as her voice lowered to a more intimate level as though she were afraid of being overheard.

“As you know, my family is from Kaifeng but it is a very diverse province. Many people of many religions live there and my father was a practitioner of traditional medicine. Many people came to him so he was very learned in all of their customs and beliefs.” She hesitated, “Did your friend tell you what Lian Yu meant?”

“Purgatory, I believe,” he answered.

She nodded, “In Tao, as in Buddhism, there is no permanent ‘hell’ just as there is no hell in the Jewish faith. Instead life is eternal, a revolving cycle, and Tao itself means ‘life’. However, there is a
concept of Purgatory in Tao. It isn’t a place of permanent rest but instead an underworld from which a soul may someday free itself through prayer. Have you ever heard of Kwan Yin or the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara?’

“I’ve heard of Kwan Yin,” he said, his brow furrowing. “However, the only thing I know about her is that she’s some sort of goddess.”

“Yes and no,” she told him. “Kwan Yin was a Bodhisattva, a being of bodhi or enlightenment, one who has earned the privilege of leaving the world of suffering and is destined to become a buddha, but has forgone the bliss of nirvana with a vow to save all children of god. She was at one time a mortal woman who achieved this through acts of great compassion and courage. Have you ever heard the story of Miao Shan?”

“I’m not familiar, no,” he told her.

“There are many stories of Miao Shan but this is the one I think may help you.” She seemed to center herself once again, “Back in Confucian China lived a king named Miao Chuang, a wicked and terrible man whose third and final daughter was so radiant that he named her Miao Shan which means ‘Bright Lady’. The girl very much lived up to her name. They say that when she was born many signs and portents were seen around the time of her birth which was said to be on the 19th day of the 2nd moon. February 19th,” she clarified.

“Master Bruce’s birthday is on the 19th,” he said with a smile.

“Very auspicious,” she told him. “There are three festivals celebrating Kwan Yin held throughout the year and Baby was born in July during Kwan Yin’s celebration of enlightenment. The festival begins on July 19th to celebrate first her sacrifice, then for four days afterwards her descent into the underworld, and then, on the last day, her ascension and return. Her birthday is actually Kwan Yin’s Ascension day, July 24th, a day of great compassion and joy. It was my idea to name her Felicity for that very reason even though I do not practice Tao or Buddhism. Still, it is a very joyous season and one I remember fondly from my childhood.”

“Similar to Easter then?” He asked.

She paused to consider that, “Not quite, but similar. Kwan Yin is a goddess of women and fertility so many women honor her during her feast days and pray to her so that they may have children; no bunny rabbits or chocolate eggs, however,” she told him with a chuckle. “Instead they celebrate with cakes and buns called ang koo, which is a red rice cake, mee koo, which are red buns, and huat kuih, which are called prosperous cakes, and her devotees bring her offerings of fruits, vegetables, cakes, dry goods like sugar and rice, and chrysanthemums.” She smiled, “I used to make Baby pink peach cake for her birthday which is also a traditional offering to Kwan Yin during her feast. She used to love it because it would stain her lips bright pink and she would say that she was a big girl now because she was wearing lipstick!” She said with a tinkling laugh.

“That sounds perfectly adorable and so like Miss Felicity when she was a child,” he chuckled, “Continue your story, please.”

She nodded and furrowed her brow slightly as if trying to remember, “Before her birth, Queen Po Ta, the king’s wife, had a strange dream in which she saw a heavenly pearl transforming into a fiery sun which then tumbled down and settled at her feet. When told of it, the king, in his wisdom, considered the seeing of such a celestial sign to be an excellent omen and he looked forward to having a male heir to his throne. However, to his great disappointment, a girl was born. Still, she was very beautiful and kind and, although he was not moved by either of these attributes, he thought that perhaps he could make her an advantageous marriage and gain an heir in that way instead.”
“Even though Miao Shan was a princess and therefore had the finest of riches to choose from, she spent her days in quiet contemplation while renouncing fine food, clothing, and all other trappings of royal life. Her father found three men, all very wealthy and powerful, to marry his daughters and thereby increase his kingdom. Her sisters immediately agreed to the matches without complaint because they feared their father and knew what refusing him would mean. However, when it came time for Miao Shan to marry, she adamantly refused. Where, she asked her father, was there a husband who could give her the gifts of the Buddha—freedom from the fear of sickness, old age, and death? Miao Shan reminded her father that even a king had no protection from these things and that eventually he, too, would suffer and die.”

“This angered her father. He had found what he considered to be a suitable husband and yet she refused him. In fact, he was so enraged that he put her in a nunnery, known as the Convent of the White Sparrow, and threatened the nuns with torture and death unless they subjected her daughter to the harshest of treatment in order to cure her of her stubbornness. If she wishes to spend her days in contemplation of those suffering, then let her suffer, he said. Let her know their pain so that she can realize that she should be grateful and obedient. Despite this, Miao Shan willingly and happily worked at menial tasks and suffered many hardships in contented silence.”

“The nuns, in deference to the king’s wishes, forced Miao Shan to work all day and all night, while others slept, in order to finish her work. They forced her to carry wood and water from the river at the base of the mountain and instructed her to plant a garden in a barren field where nothing would grow then threatened to beat her should she not succeed. The horses and oxen hearing this left their stables to plow the field and the many species of birds that surrounded the temple began to fetch seeds and grains from all over the kingdom, dropping them in the upturned soil in order to help her. To the surprise of the nuns, the garden bloomed even in winter and a spring welled up from nowhere next to the kitchen so she would be saved from her hard labors. Her father, seeing this, became so frustrated that he attempted to burn down the temple, killing everyone inside. Miao Shan, feeling no anger and wishing to save the nuns that showed her such cruelty, put out the fire with her bare hands yet suffered no burns. Now struck with fear, the desperate king decided to kill her.”

“He sent in men who slaughtered all five hundred nuns within, then had them drag Miao Shan out to be beheaded. As the executioner tried to carry out her father’s orders a blinding thunderstorm came. Lightning stuck his axe causing it to shatter into a thousand pieces. He then tried a sword which likewise shattered. He tried to shoot Miao Shan down with arrows but a great wind swept through and they all veered off.”

“Finally in desperation he used his hands and attempted to strangle her. Miao Shan, realizing the fate that the executioner would meet at her father’s hand should she fail to allow herself die, forgave the executioner for attempting to kill her thus leaving him free from sin. By taking on the executioner’s karma however, she was sentenced to Purgatory. Yama, King of the Underworld Realms, sent to her a supernatural tiger, to carry her upon his back into his kingdom.”

“The tiger took her to Purgatory where she met the demon king who became entranced by her loveliness. There, she encountered suffering souls crying out for mercy. As she began to shower them with love and compassion and sing them songs of infinite beauty, the suffering souls began liberating themselves, and wherever she stepped, lotus flowers and healing herbs would bloom. The presence of Miao Shan in Purgatory began to turn it into a paradise. Yama, fearing the loss of his kingdom and recognizing that Miao Shan did not belong there, released her and gave her the Water of Life which was made from the tears she shed for the suffering of the damned, and the Food of Life which was made from the flowers and herbs that sprang from her footsteps, so that she could be resurrected. Miao Shan ascended from the underworld into heaven but when she heard the suffering of the people on Earth, she rejected paradise so that she could offer them her compassion. She returned to life as a Bodhi, a being of great spiritual energy, and lived on a remote island called Putuo
Shan, sometimes also called Lian Yu, in the cave that was the entrance to the underworld, healing the sick, guiding the escaping souls into the light, and offering comfort to those who needed it. In the years that passed she performed many great miracles and the fishermen who would visit her began to call her Kwan Yin, which means ‘She Who Hears the Cries and Comes’.

“Some time later, a terrible sickness came to the wicked king, reminding him of his daughter’s warnings about the things even kings fear. A physician advised him that only a potion made from the willing sacrifice of two human arms and two human eyes by one who had never felt anger could save him. Without much hope, he sent out his ministers in search of such a person who would willingly give up arms and eyes. To his great surprise, they found such a person within days; the potion was made and the king saved. The king, grateful for this sacrifice, set out to meet this Bodhi only to discover it was his own daughter, Miao Shan. The once-wicked king was filled with remorse when he found out it was his daughter who’d been mutilated and fell to his knees, begging her forgiveness.

“She comforted her father with prophetic words: “Do not worry, Father. Mortal eyes give way to diamond eyes, and mortal arms to arms of gold.” He ordered a statue made of her, and in her honor he commanded that it have no arms and no eyes. But the sculptor misunderstood his words, and gave the statue instead a thousand arms and a thousand eyes. The king knew then that Miao Shan could do anything with so many arms, could see anything with so many eyes. Her compassion comforted him, and now he was willing to extend this comfort to all people. He placed the statue of his daughter at the mouth of the cave where she once lived and from that day on she was remembered and honored by him and his family with sacrifices of flowers, fruits, herbs, and vegetables.”

“That’s a lovely story but, other than the name of the island, I don’t quite understand what this has to do with the tea,” Alfred said in confusion.

She looked uncomfortable for a moment and her voice again dropped to a more confidential level, “My father used to hear legends of herbs that could heal any injury, cure any sickness, and counter any poison. It was called, ‘Shén de shēnshēng shíwù’ also known as ‘The Food of Life’ and was said to grow at the mouth of Kwan Yin’s cave on the island of Lian Yu. Kwan Yin, as often depicted in pictures, is almost always seen holding a small vial of water called, ‘Guānyīn de yǎnlèi’ or ‘Kwan Yin’s Tears’ which many also call ‘The Water of Life’, and is surrounded by or holding herbs, plants, and flowers which represent the Food of Life.”

“My father would search for this island but could not locate it on any map. Even though he was an observant Jew, he traveled once to Zhejiang to visit the monastery on Mount Putuo, said to be the same Putuo Shan in the legend of Kwan Yin, in order to investigate but could not find these herbs nor could anyone tell him where they could be.” She took a deep breath, “I cannot say I ever believed in it myself, I don’t even think my father did, it was merely a hobby for him, but if these herbs can truly do what you say…”

“You think these could really be the same herbs as in the legend?” He asked, looking down at them.

“I do not know,” she said, relaxing slightly. “Probably not. It is, after all, just a lovely story, a fable, and as we both know, there is no such thing as miraculous waters that can bring the dead back to life or mystical herbs that can heal all ailments of the body. It would be nice though, wouldn’t it?”

“Indeed,” he said, his eyes troubled as he stared down at the herbs with a frown.

“It’s a soccer mom car,” Renee said flatly as Laurel and Felicity oohed and ahhed over the deep red minivan.
“Felicity,” Laurel said wide-eyed from the back as she held up an upholstery attachment, “It has a built in vacuum cleaner.”

“Get out!” She said in astonishment. “Hey, check this out; it has like a ton of power outlets and did you see the size of the GPS display?”

The manager nodded happily, “It’s also incredibly safe. It has both a Forward Collision Warning and Lane Departure Warning as well as a rearview camera. It also has a nav system, Bluetooth and text messaging, and a top of the line speaker system. Oh, and,” he pointed at the center console, “it has a refrigerated ‘cool box’ to keep drinks cold right here in the console.”

“Shut up!” Laurel said, her jaw dropping. “It has its own mini-fridge?”

“My wife has the same model van and she keeps fruit cups and juice boxes in it for our kids,” he nodded. “She also puts the ice cream in it during the summer so it doesn’t melt as quickly on the way home from the grocery store.”

“How did I not know that minivans had all this stuff?” Laurel said coming around to look at the cooler. “Why have I been driving a BMW sedan this entire time when I could have had one of these?”

“I’ve been driving a Mini Cooper,” Felicity said slightly shell-shocked. “You could fit my whole car in this thing and still have room for dry cleaning and a month’s worth of groceries then do jumping jacks in the back seat.”

“Hey, did you girls look over there?” Wildcat asked them. “There are all kinds of sports cars, maybe an SUV? Hey, I’ll bet you’d love a convertible; spring is right around the corner.”

“You know, this van is also incredibly fuel efficient,” the manager told her. “It probably gets about the same mileage as that BMW sedan you were driving.”

“Really?” Laurel asked him.

“Is that a satellite radio?” Felicity said pointing it out.

“Yes it is,” he told her. “Plus Pandora and a year’s free subscription.”

“You do not want a minivan!” Wildcat told her, marching towards them.

“Thank you,” Renee said dryly.

“Listen, trust me, minivans are these bulky, loud, uncomfortable gas guzzlers that are made for people who coach little league,” he told Felicity as he walked up to the car to look inside. “They got no power and blow through transmissions quicker than snot!”

The salesman looked at him, “Actually sir, this model gets between 19 and 28 miles per gallon does 60 mph in 7.9 seconds. It’s not a sports car but it’s got a lot of power and is a number one top safety pick.”

“Really?” He said then peered inside, “Hang on, are those foot rests?”

“Yes, they are,” he told him. “The passenger seats fully recline and it seats eight comfortably. Plus, the way it’s built, it drives just like a sedan; it’s not bulky or unwieldy at all. I mean, I totally get where you’re coming from; I used to hate minivans myself, but there is a reason the owner of a Mercedes dealership picked this over anything else in the lot. I’m telling you, hop in the back and see
if that doesn’t feel like you’re sitting in your favorite recliner watching the ball game. Hell, when my mother-in-law comes over I just sit out in mine, grab a soda out of the cool box in the console, pop a movie in the DVD player, and hide until she leaves.”

“No foolin’?” Wildcat said slowly as he examined the back seats more carefully.

“Did you see the vacuum?” Laurel said moving to the back of the van again. “Seriously, it has its own vacuum cleaner built in!”

“Well, I’ll be damned. How’s that thing work anyhow?” He said looking toward it with interest.

“Oh, and that panel right there,” the salesman said as he pointed them towards it, “comes off to reveal a fully equipped first aid kit.”

“That’s handy,” Felicity said.

“But it’s a minivan!” Renee said insistently. “You can’t—” she grimaced, “do what we do,” she said meaningfully, “and drive a minivan. A Harley, yes, a cool sports car, yes, a minivan? No. People like us don’t drive around in freaking minivans!”

“She’s right,” Laurel said, putting the vacuum attachment she was showing Wildcat down reluctantly.

“Yeah,” Felicity said a little sadly. “Besides, I really don’t need the third row seating.”

“That’s easily fixed,” the manager said, walking around to the back and flipping a lever before folding the seats into the floor effortlessly.

“Wow,” Laurel breathed.

“It’s like magic,” Felicity said awestruck.

“Look at all the cargo room,” Wildcat said slowly. “I could fit a ton of equipment for my gym in here.”

“It’s still a minivan,” Renee said with a scowl. “Are you seriously going to go from a sweet ride like that Benz to a Mom-mobile? Do you really want to show up at Orbital in a ride that has a built in car seat?!”

“Actually, it doesn’t have a built in car seat but it does have car seat anchoring clips if you needed them,” the salesman told her.

“Mini. Van,” Renee enunciated carefully. “Why are you even thinking about this? You don’t even have kids!

“She’s right, I don’t have kids,” Felicity told the salesman with a sigh. “Feels like it some days but, nope; no kids.”

“Kids aren’t actually a requirement to own one of these,” he told her with a slight smile. “Did I mention it also comes with a trailer hitch, towing package, and it has heated seats, remote start, and automatic climate control?”

“Remote start and heated seats?” Felicity said, perking up.

“Those were the magic words,” Laurel said to the salesman.
“I give up,” Renee muttered.

“Hand it over,” Wildcat said, holding his hand out for the key fob.

“I want to drive,” Felicity told him with a frown. “Technically, it’s my car.”

“If I got to run all over town in a damn minivan then I’m drivin’!” He told her.

“Fine,” she said handing over the fob and climbing in the passenger side. “You know, you might not look like you’re a hundred and six but you definitely act like it.”

“They weren’t kidding when they said the seats were comfortable,” Laurel said, bouncing slightly in the back. “I could live in this thing!”

“It’s a minivan and everyone in here is *supposed* to be a badass mask!” Renee said stubbornly. “Masks don’t drive around in minivans! What happens if a bad guy sees you driving around in this thing? Do you think Batman would be half as intimidating as he is if he hopped out of a suburban mom-tank with a tray full of orange slices and a bunch of those little stick family stickers in the shape of bats in the back glass? I refuse to participate in…does this thing have an X-Box?” She said reaching into the seat back in front of her and pulling out a pair of cordless headphones and a game controller.

“It’s possible,” Felicity said from the front. “He did say the lady was having this thing fitted with a bunch of extras.”

“Cool,” Renee breathed as she pressed a button and the split screen player folded down and began to play.

“Oh my God,” Laurel said as she leaned back her seat causing the foot rest to come up then pressed a button that caused the seat to hum. “Oh my God, it has built in massage; I want one of these.”

“We can share,” Felicity said, poking through the console. “Remind me to buy some drinks for our mini-fridge. Man, this is so much better than a Cooper.”

Wildcat put down his foot and grunted in approval, “You know, I might even consider getting myself one.”

“Really?” Felicity asked him.

“I said I *might* consider it,” he said grumpily then relaxed his expression as he threaded the van through traffic, “It does have some get up and go though, I’ll give you that.”

“What do you think Renee?” Laurel asked the other woman with a grin.

“Die zombie fuckers!” She cursed at the screen triumphantly. “That’s what you get for eating all of my sunflowers!”

Felicity looked from her to Laurel, “I think she likes it.”

“Hah!” Renee crowed. “Level six! Eat pumpkin bombs you bastards!”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stop by the shelter before we head home?” Felicity asked as they
entered the grocery store.

“I thought about it but we should let Ace settle in first,” Laurel told her. “Besides, you said Sara wanted a cat too so I was thinking it was something she and I could do together, you know? Kind of like a re-bonding thing.”

“How many beds and toys does one dog need anyway?” Renee asked her. “You guys practically cleaned out the pet store.”

“Technically this is my first dog so I wanted to make sure I covered all my bases,” Felicity told her. “Besides, I only bought six beds; one for my room, one for the study, one for the kitchen, one for the living room, one for the FelicityCave, and one for Orbital on the off chance I decide to bring him with me.”

“You’re going to bring the dog into Orbital?” Wildcat asked skeptically.

“She could always sic him on Helena,” Laurel suggested.

“Good point,” Wildcat nodded.

Felicity reached for a buggy. “Okay, here’s the plan; I say we split up and meet in the middle since we basically need everything.”

“I’ll stick with hot stuff on this side while you and Uncle Teddy head over to produce,” Renee suggested.

“Watch it or ‘Uncle Teddy’ is gonna put you in time out,” Wildcat said mockingly.

“Just remember, no nuts, okay?” Felicity told them. “I’ve survived too much to be taken out now by a rogue bit of trail mix.”

“Got it,” Laurel nodded, getting her own cart before she and Renee headed towards frozen foods. “I’m getting like fifty pounds of steak, swear to God. Oh, and chocolate; we’re cleaning this sucker out.”

“Seriously?” Renee asked her.

“Oh, and don’t forget the Ben and Jerry’s!” Felicity called out on her way towards the fresh section.

“Got it!” Laurel told her before waving her on.

“You forgot to ask what kind,” Renee pointed out.

“No, I didn’t,” Laurel told her. “She just told us; Ben and Jerry’s.”

The other woman looked at her in confusion, “But what flavor?”

“That’s obvious; all of them except the ones with nuts,” Laurel said easily. “We should probably get a couple of each kind just to be safe. Plus Häagen-Dazs, and we are not leaving without a shit ton of coffee in this buggy.”

Renee looked at her blankly before getting a second cart then paused and reached for a third, “You’d better hope the penthouse has a deep freeze or something, that’s all I’m saying.”
“How much celery do you need?” Wildcat said, “You’ve already got like five.”

“I like celery, plus with Laurel and Luke eating me out of house and home I doubt it’ll be around long enough to go bad,” nevertheless Felicity put down the other two bundles and moved on. She paused by a long beige vegetable, “What’s a jicama anyway?”

“I think it’s a Mexican potato,” he told her popping a grape in his mouth then putting a couple of bags of them in the buggy as well.

“You can’t eat the grapes in the store before you buy them!” She hissed at him in a harsh whisper.

“What? They’re gonna bust me for eatin’ a grape?” He asked dryly. “‘Sides, how else can you tell if they’re ripe. Want some peaches and plums?”

“Yeah, get a bunch,” She reached for the fresh green beans then paused, “Don’t taste them first though.”

“Funny,” he told her loading up the produce bags and tossing them in the shopping cart before grabbing some apples as well. “So what’s the deal with you and this Oliver guy anyway?”

She blew out a harsh breath before answering him, “That’s a long story.” She picked up an odd looking yellow fruit, “What does star fruit taste like?”

He glanced over at it, “It’s kinda like an apple, pear, grape, pineapple, lemon, and grapefruit sort of thing all mixed up together.”

“So it’s a one-stop fruit salad,” she said looking at it and debating before throwing it and four more into the buggy then reaching for some kiwi fruit.

He tossed a bag of clementine’s and some navel oranges in the buggy as well, “I got time if you want to tell me that story. By the way, what other kinds of stuff do you want over here?”

“Salad stuff, bananas, more fruit—basically all the normal stuff,” she told him then picked up a large purple vegetable, “What do rutabagas taste like?”

“It’s like a cross between a cabbage and a turnip,” he told her.

“Huh,” she said looking at it askance. “What do turnips taste like?”

“Like a rutabaga, now are you gonna give me the skinny on this Oliver guy or what?” He asked her.

She grabbed a few and tossed them into the cart as well, “I worked with his mission for almost four years.”

“And?” He prompted, tossing in several heads of lettuce and some carrots.

“And what?” She said, not meeting his eyes as she grabbed some bok choy.

“And what,” he snorted as he reached for a flat of blueberries. “You know what I mean! You ain’t that blonde, sweetheart, despite that ‘butter won’t melt in my mouth’ routine you pulled at the dealership. Nice job with that, by the way. What other kind of berries do you want?”

“Just get some of everything,” she told him. “We danced around each other for almost four years, had the slowest slow burn in history, had one night together, and that’s it,” she said tossing in some broccoli and cauliflower.
“If that was it then he wouldn’t have been camped out at your kitchen table in his jammies this mornin’,” he told her as he put the flats of cherries, raspberries, strawberries, and blackberries down. “You like pears?”

“Only the ones that are really mushy and sweet,” she told him. “The Anjou ones? I can’t remember. QC always send its employees some kind of fruit basket every year for Christmas. I’m Jewish but fruit is fruit, know what I mean?”

“These?” He asked, holding up a yellowish gold pear.

“No,” she said looking at it. “They’re green and red and kind of big and juicy.”

“These?” He asked holding up another pear.

“Yeah….maybe,” she said squinting.

“These aren’t Anjou pears, they’re,” he glanced at the label, “Royal Riviera pears.”

“I don’t know, just toss them in there along with whatever else looks good,” she told him as she grabbed some colored bell peppers, asparagus, and English cucumbers. “The truth is I don’t know why Oliver is here.”

He chuckled, “Oh, I took one look at him and could tell you exactly why he’s here.”

She scowled at him, “Look, he loves me, okay? He loves me, I love him, but we’re just running at two different speeds right now.” She started picking through the potatoes, “How many sweet potatoes can you eat?”

“You’re cookin’ me dinner?” He asked her.

“Well, yeah; you’re helping me grocery shop, I figured I might as well feed you,” she shrugged.

“I can put away two or three,” he told her.

She looked at their cart, “We might need another buggy and we haven’t even gotten past produce yet.” She sighed and began filling up the clear plastic veggie bags with potatoes. “Hey, grab some of those russet potatoes near the tomatoes.”

“But you love Bruce too, right?” He asked her as he picked them up along with a flat of heirloom tomatoes and tossed them in as well.

“I’m kind of in love with both of them but I’m *with* Bruce,” she said reluctantly. “How do you feel about corn on the cob?”

“Like it deserves its own postage stamp that tastes like butter when you lick it,” he told her. “How do you feel about Brussels sprouts?”

“Like if you put that in my buggy I will hit you. Egg plant?”

“Definitely,” he nodded. “So you’re in love with this Oliver guy but you’re marrying Bruce?”

“It’s complicated,” she told him.

“No shit,” he snorted.

She grabbed a sack of fingerling potatoes and some sweet Italian onions. “I don’t know; frankly
they’ve both got me feeling confused.”

“Mangoes?” He asked as he grabbed a few bunches of bananas.

She wrinkled her nose, “They always taste like bug spray to me.”

“I like ‘em,” he said tossing them in anyway. “And Bruce already knows about all this?”

“He knows,” she said going up to the small section in between produce and bakery with all the dried salad fixings and pouches of tempura mix. She tossed in some dried cranberries, raisins, mushroom batter, bacon bits, and croutons.

“And he’s okay with it?” He asked grabbing a few different kinds of mushrooms and laying them on top of the pile.

“No one is okay with it, I’m not okay with it, but I also wasn’t going to lie about something like that,” she said heading out of produce and into bakery after Wildcat picked up some cantaloupes and added them to their haul.

“You know, I’ve known Bruce a long time and he’s never been hung up on a woman the way he’s hung up on you,” he told her.

“What about Selina?” She asked as she placed several loaves of whole wheat bread in the basket.

“Eh, he could get turned around by her but he was never caught up,” he told her as he put in some French bread along with some rye and pumpernickel.

She steered the cart towards the health food section, “He looked for her for years though.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and ambled beside her, “Yes and no; he looked but if he really wanted to find her, he could have. I think it was more about keepin’ tabs and makin’ sure she was okay, but he was never really…not possessive, more like fully invested in her, know what I mean?”

“Not really,” she reached for several bags of raw pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, and yogurt covered pretzels.

“I though you said you was allergic,” he asked pointing to the bags.

“Those aren’t nuts, they’re seeds,” she told him as she also added a few jars of sunflower butter and held one up to show him. “This is my version of peanut butter and I like to roast the seeds for snacks and make my own trail mix. That reminds me, we need to hit the cereal aisle and see what kinds of nut-free granola they’ve got.”

“Are you gonna have enough room for all this stuff?” He asked looking at their rapidly increasing bounty.

“There is literally nothing at the penthouse but the leftover bagels you brought and I have a huge Subzero and a second smaller fridge and deep freezer in the butler’s pantry. Unless Laurel goes completely nuts and buys a side of beef we should be fine.” She steered them toward the dairy section, “I always thought Bruce was pretty invested in her; they were together a long time.”

“There’s together and then there’s *together*,” he said with a furrowed brow. “Selina lived up to her handle in every way; she was independent, passionate, did what she wanted when she wanted, and even if she’d let you stroke her fur every once in a while she made sure you knew she didn’t belong to anyone but herself.” A wistful smile appeared on his lips, “She was a hell of a girl, that’s for sure.”
“Was? It’s not like she’s dead. Wait, she’s not dead, is she?” She asked, pausing in alarm as she reached for the half and half.

“Naw, she’s fine. She even drops me a line every once in a while,” he assured her as he began tossing in different kinds of cheeses.

“Good,” she breathed out in relief as she reached for a gallon of milk before heading toward the sour cream. After picking out a few cartons, she paused, her hand hovering above the butter, “Wait, if she’s been sending you messages then that means you’ve known where she was this whole time?”

He closed his eyes and winced, “I suppose it’s too late to take that back, huh?”

“Why would you keep that from Bruce?” She asked him, placing the butter and cream cheese in the cart.

“She asked me not to say nothin’,” he shrugged. “You like string cheese?”

She started picking out several containers of yogurt, “Not really but Luke does so grab a bag. In fact, grab two; he eats more than anyone I’ve ever met and as long as we have food in the house he’s going to be practically living there. So you knew where Selina was but instead of telling Bruce she was okay, you just let him keep looking?”

“Aw shit, well…” he threw her a sheepish look, “Rock and a hard place, you know? ‘Sides, it worked out in the end. He got over it eventually. Like I said, it wasn’t like they was ever really exclusive. Hell, they had their thing, she and Dick had a moment or two, plus she was seein’ some private detective, and every once in a while we’d hook up…”

“You slept with Selina?” She asked, mouth falling open in surprise. “Did Bruce know?”

“’Course he knew,” he scoffed. “We never talked about it but Selina wasn’t one for hidin’ shit like that. Like I said, they were a bit more than casual but that didn’t mean they were pickin’ out china patterns either.”

She frowned and turned into the cereal aisle, “That doesn’t sound like the Bruce I know. He tends to be pretty territorial.”

“That’s because it isn’t the Bruce *you* know, it’s the one everybody else does,” he told her. “I’ve known Bruce since he first put on the cowl and I’m tellin’ you, honey, what he’s got for you he never had for nobody else. I don’t know what you got goin’ on with this Oliver fella, seems like a hell of a great guy, but just because Bruce might seem bulletproof, it don’t mean he is. Think twice before you hurt him, that’s all I’m sayin’.”

“I love Bruce,” she told him quietly. “He knows it, Oliver knows it, and even though I love both of them, I’m with him and I’ve made a commitment to being with him. I’ve never lied to him and he knows everything that happened between me and Oliver both before I left Starling and that he spent the night last night at the penthouse.” At the look on the other man’s face she added, “And no, I didn’t sleep with him nor do I intend to.”

“But you’re tempted?” He asked her, “It’s okay if you are; hell, I’m not judgin’ a damn thing, I’m just sayin’ that if you do go there, cut the guy a break and end it clean first. Bruce is a son of a bitch but he’s also my friend and, if you were Selina he might get pissy for a while then let it go, but with you…” He shook his head, “Trust me, I’ve seen this situation play out before and shit like this has a tendency to blow up in your face.”

“Like I said, even if I still have feelings for Oliver, we can’t be together because his life is too
unsettled right now,” she said shifting her stance uncomfortably. “I don’t know, it just seems like I’m being pulled in two different directions sometimes. They both want me to be with them, both of them asked me to marry them and have kids, but I can only choose one of them.” She sighed, “The truth is, yeah, I love them both and I could see myself spending my life with either one of them, crazy as that sounds. I mean, neither one of them is perfect; Bruce can be an ass and Oliver isn’t any better, but it just feels like…”

He stopped to lean against the grocery shelves, his arms crossed over his chest, “Like what?”

She tightened her lips and huffed out a frustrated breath, “It feels like, when it comes to their missions, Oliver is just out of the starting gate with miles to go and Bruce is already rounding the last corner. I know if I stay with either of them that the mission will always be a part of it but it feels like I have a better shot at having a life with Bruce right now, you know?” She looked up at him, “I’m tired of being pushed aside for my own good and waiting to be seen because something else is more important than I am. I’m tired of waiting for something to happen that might never get here, and as daunting as a life with Bruce sounds, he’s always seen me even when he was breaking my heart in a million pieces.”

He frowned then arched his eyebrow knowingly, “I like you, honey. Hell, I might even be gettin’ a bit of a crush here and, God knows, I’m not exactly the best person to come to for relationship advice. I’m a real son of a bitch despite this charming veneer I put on and I’ve hurt a lot of women in my time. I cheated, I lied, and I left two women in the lurch takin’ care of my kids because I didn’t man-up and take care of business the way I should have. I’ve made a lot more mistakes than Bruce or this Oliver fella ever has or ever will and I’m tellin’ you right now, masks ain’t good relationship material, darlin’,” he told her bluntly. “Our mutual friend, Jay? He and his wife have been married forever and, as much as he loves her, even he fucked up a time or two. At one point I thought for sure Joanie was gonna leave him and I really wouldn’t have blamed her for it.”

“What happened?” She asked with a confused frown. “They seemed like a fairytale couple; happily ever after.”

“Ain’t no such thing, darlin’.” He sighed, “Back a very long time ago, he lost his temper once and slapped her.”

“Seriously?” She said feeling sick to her stomach.

“It wasn’t his fault really, it was an accident. He never woulda done it in a million years otherwise but he was comin’ off a case where he got hit by somethin’ and still not himself, lost his shit, and smacked her,” he shook his head. “Not hard, he didn’t even leave a bruise, but it pretty much snapped him out of it instantly. Damage was done though. Joanie wasn’t the type to put up with that shit, and she left him for a while. He felt like a real son of a bitch wife-beater afterwards, called himself every kind of bastard there was for it. I didn’t take it as seriously back then as I would now because I knew Jay and couldn’t ever imagine him doin’ somethin’ like that. I made a remark about him switchin’ from Yoohoo’s to Ovaltine, said he probably just drank too much with his cookies and that I’d smooth it over for him. Soon as the words left my big fat mouth he kicked my ass for even jokin’ about it. He was right to do it, too,” he told her. “That shit’s not somethin’ you should ever joke about but Joanie eventually forgave him and he retired shortly after that. He couldn’t take the mission anymore, not if it was turnin’ him into a monster even if he wasn’t really at fault.” His eyes met hers, “Guess what I’m sayin’ honey, is if you’re lookin’ for a happily ever after with either of those guys, you ain’t gonna find it. Best you can hope for is good enough and ‘good enough’ means you havin’ to forgive a lot of shit no sane woman should.”

“Neither of them would ever hurt me,” she told him.
“There’s all kinds of hurt, honey,” he told her. “Words and actions bruise deeper than any closed fist, trust me. The pain lasts a hell of a lot longer.”

“Believe me, I know that,” she said wryly.

“Look, I’m not tryin’ to talk you into anything and I’m sure as hell not tryin’ to talk you out of anything, but you’ve been tellin’ me what they want; what do you want?”

She opened her mouth to answer him then stopped.

“Well?” He prompted.

“I just…I just want to…” she struggled to put it in words, “I want to go home; not home as in a specific place, just *home*,” she emphasized. “I want to feel safe and loved and I want the person I’m with to see me and not forget I exist the minute they leave the room or something else comes up.” She ducked her head, “I don’t need marriage, or kids, or even a mission; I just don’t want to be alone anymore. I’m tired of…I’m tired of being alone all the time,” she said quietly.

“I get that,” he said in a low voice. “Believe me, honey; I know exactly what you mean.” He seemed to shake himself out of it then picked up a box of granola and read through the label. “Is this brand okay?”

She glanced at it, “Any nuts?”

“I don’t see any listed in the ingredients or the warnings.”

“Grab a couple of boxes,” she told him. “Oh, and pick up whatever kinds of cereals you like.”

“You doin’ my shoppin’, too now?” He asked, throwing her a crooked grin.

“I just figured that if you’re going to be hanging out at my place regularly you might want a snack,” she shrugged. “My kitchen is your kitchen, right?”

He gave her a warm look and shook his head, “You’re somethin’ else, honey.”

“What do you mean?” She asked, tossing in a large canister of old fashioned oatmeal.

“You got a habit of pickin’ up strays, don’t ya?” He said bemusedly. “I never met a girl like you before,” he said picking out some high protein cereal along with some Cream of Wheat. “Probably a good thing, too. You know, I think that if Bruce hadn’t found you first, you might have had a fair to middlin’ shot at convincing an old stray tom like me to give up my wanderin’ ways. After getting’ to know you, it don’t surprise me none that you got ole Bruce all tied up in knots over you.”

She steered the cart into the next aisle and tossed in some ketchup and mustard, “Are you saying I could have turned you from a Wildcat into a house cat?” She teased.

“Hell, you already got me runnin’ around in a damn minivan, what do you think?” He shot back.

“What kind of salad dressings do you like?”

“Get ranch, Italian, balsamic, and a few different vinaigrettes,” she told him. “I like to switch things up every once in a while.”

“Well if I’m gonna be hangin’ around then I’m gettin’ some thousand island,” he told her then tossed in some steak sauce as they moved down the aisle. “Plus, maybe we could look into getting’ a grill for out on that deck of yours,” he told her. “Remind me to pick up some charcoal before we head
over to the hardware store. If I’m gonna get all domesticated for you girls then there better be steaks involved.”

“I’m pretty sure that with Laurel doing the meat shopping there will be,” she said dryly.

“You want how many rib eyes?” The butcher behind the counter asked her incredulously.

Laurel asked him, “How many do you have? Oh, and twenty of the biggest porterhouses you’ve got; make them thick, like huge,” she said holding her fingers several inches apart.

“She doesn’t need that many,” Renee said, stepping up. “Halve that and just get us the rest of it and we’ll be back in a minute to pick it up. Oh and,” she held her fingers much closer together than the other woman did but still a more than adequate amount. “Don’t give us the whole cow, okay?”

“Okay,” the man in the white apron said faintly as he took the whole rib eye out of the case and over to the counter to be prepped.

“You are seriously over-shopping, you know that right?” Renee said dragging the two already full carts behind her as Laurel filled a third. “How much coffee do you need, anyway? What did you do, get one of every kind they had?”

“Not every kind,” she told her. “Just the ones that aren’t decaf.” Her eyes lit up as she headed towards the next aisle, “Oooh, chocolate. Oh man, did you see this? Vermont Nut-free dark chocolates! Oh, and plain Hershey bars, Kisses, gummy worms, Pop Rocks, Twizzlers, Rolos, Jelly Belly jelly beans, Skittles, Tootsie Rolls, Swedish Fish—ooh, Whoppers! Oh, we’re getting those for sure. Hey, Marshmallows! Oh my God, did you know they made them jumbo sized like this? How did I not know this? These things are fricking huge! You know, we should go back to the coffee aisle and get some hot cocoa.”

“How are you so skinny?” Renee said in amazement as she trailed behind her.

“Okay, last thing is Oreos,” Felicity said heading down the aisle and running straight into Renee and Laurel.

“Goddamn,” Wildcat said eyeing their collection of carts in amazement.

“I tried talking her down but I just couldn’t,” Renee told them apologetically. “It was like a grocery store feeding frenzy.”

“You guys filled up three buggies?” She asked eyeing the close to overflowing oversized carts.

“Five,” Laurel said looking up from the label she was reading. “We left two up front. How many did you fill up?”

She turned to point at their cart hesitantly, “Uh, just one,” she said holding up her finger.

She snorted, “That’s it? What have you guys been doing all this time?” At Felicity’s and Wildcat’s dumbfounded expressions she shrugged, “What? You’re the one who wanted ice cream. Oh, did you see what we found? Turducken!” She said giddily. “We got the biggest one they had. I figured we could have like a belated Thanksgiving when Sara gets back since everybody on the team missed it back in Starling last year. We already picked out all the stuff for it; pumpkin pie, whip cream,
cranberry sauce, the little tiny peas in the silver can…”

“Sure…” Felicity said biting her lip. “By the way, you did take your meds this morning, right? Not that, you know, that has anything to do with what we’re talking about but…”

“I’m good, I’m just really, really hungry,” she told her. “You should never shop on an empty stomach.”

“You ate five bagels and two muffins,” Renee said flatly. “My ass got bigger just watching you.”

“I have a high metabolism,” she shrugged, “We should stop and pick up something on our way home for lunch. By the way, do you know how hard it is finding nut-free cookies? It seems like everything I’ve looked at has nuts on the label.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said walking up to the Oreos before stopping dead in her tracks, “Oh my God, they have Chocos.” She picked up the box and looked at it reverentially. “I haven’t had a Choco in forever!”

“What’s a Choco?” Laurel asked, walking over to examine the box in her hand. “It looks like an off-brand Oreo.”

“It is,” Renee said, leaning heavily on her cart.

“No, it’s not,” Felicity told her. “Chocos are even better than Oreos.”

“How so?” Wildcat asked her.

“You’ve never had a Choco?” She asked looking at him.

“Not much of a cookie kind of guy,” he shrugged.

“I can’t believe you’ve lived in Gotham this long and never had a Choco,” she muttered then sighed, “You know how the whole point of an Oreo is the white stuff in the middle?” She asked him.

“Generally when I eat a cookie I eat the whole thing, so no,” he said in wry amusement.

“Okay, well, trust me; most people just twist them apart and then eat the middle before tossing away the black cookie part because it doesn’t really taste like anything,” she said matter-of-factly. “Chocos not only are bigger and have more of the white stuff, but the cookie part actually tastes like chocolate.” She grabbed a couple of boxes off the shelf, “You have no idea how much I’ve missed these living on the West Coast; that and real Gotham-style pizza.” She looked over her friends, “Alrighty then; you guys ready to check out? Wildcat wants to stop and pick up a grill so we can have steaks for lunch.”

“Luckily we have plenty,” Renee said wryly as she slid one of the carts towards Wildcat.

Laurel lingered behind for a second before grabbing three more boxes of Chocos and stacking them precariously on top of her already overloaded buggy. “Hey Felicity, do you still have that Price Club membership thing? Maybe we should see if they have one of those here?”
Quick note on the illustrations:

The following are, from left to right, Ace the Bathound, Bruce, Clark, and Lucius. I have more detailed notes on that at the end of the chapter. Enjoy! ---Jen

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Chapter Fifty-Four

Tam glanced at the huge dog that was currently watching Felicity prepare the salad for lunch with great interest, “Baby, when I said I wanted a dog I meant a ‘dog’, not a pony.”

She sighed and handed Ace a carrot slice which he ate greedily before picking up the peeler and dealing with the cucumbers, “It’s Bruce’s dog; consider him to be a loaner or a practice dog.”

“A practice dog,” she said flatly.

“Yeah, you know, to ease you into the idea of taking care of a dog,” she said handing Ace another carrot after he gave her a low ‘woof’.

Tam tilted her head, giving her an incredulous look, as she gestured toward the dog in question, “How is *that* easing into anything? He weighs two hundred fricking pounds,” she asked her.

Felicity looked at him carefully, “More like one-seventy, one-eighty tops, isn’t that right, Ace?” She made a kissy noise toward the dog who was dancing on his front paws impatiently, “Want another carrot?” She asked and he gave another ‘wuff’ of air and bounced on his feet slightly as she handed him another before sneaking a sip of her coffee.

She’d been cutting down considerably on her caffeine intake but when Laurel insisted they stop for coffee on the way home, she wasn’t going to say no. Besides, ever since they walked through the door Tam had been having a hissy fit over the dog so she needed the pick me up in order to deal with her. Admittedly, wine would be better but with two recovering alcoholics in the house she figured a large Café Cubano (which was the size of a regular coffee but since the Cuban espresso was normally served as a shot, it was the equivalent of four demitasse servings) with extra crema and lots of demerara sugar was a better idea, especially considering how little sleep she’d gotten the night before.

She listened to Tam with half an ear as she savored the very strong, very sweet coffee with a hum of satisfaction. The last time she had this particular drink was right after the thing with the Poo Pirate. She ordered Thea to go get the strongest coffee they had at her favorite coffee place, The Geeky Monkey, which was located just down the street from the club, then went into a cleaning jag the likes of which none of them had ever seen. When she finally crashed on the couch, the place was spotless and Diggle, Lance, and Roy were all hopping around on crutches with dust rags in their hands so she wouldn’t yell at them anymore.

Oliver, naturally, skipped out the second he realized where things were headed. Domestics were never his strong suit.
To this day none of them would admit who it was that left the seat up but, whoever it was, they picked the wrong damn day for her to fall into the toilet, that’s for sure.

Tam scowled at her, “When we talked about getting a dog I said ‘a poodle’ or ‘a yorkie’; something we could buy sweaters for and put inside of a teacup!”

“We bought him sweaters,” Laurel said from the other end of the table where she and Renee were folding laundry. “You should show her that rain coat we bought him; it’s adorable. The minute we found it I just started hearing the ‘Trust the Gorton’s Fisherman!’ jingle, you know?” She paused, “Damn, now I want fish sticks; I really hope those steaks are going to be done soon.”

“You are like a bottomless pit,” Renee told her as she reached for another Choco and popped it in her mouth. “How do white girls get away with this shit? If I ate like that, my ass would be swallowing this chair right now. Even with working out constantly my butt makes Jennifer Lopez’s look like she needs to gain a few pounds just to catch up. Your butt though is all tight and perky despite the fact that you eat like a five year old.”

“Well, thank you for the butt thing, but I usually don’t eat like this,” she told her as she dipped her cookie in her milk. “This is me making up for lost time. As soon as I get all ‘toxified’ again I’ll back off.” She shrugged, “I’m actually thinking about taking up smoking in order to speed up the process of getting all the toxins back into my blood stream.”

“Besides, all skinny white girls have small asses,” Tam told her from the other end of the table. “It’s like their superpower.”

“Hey, I’m a white girl and I have a nice round butt,” Felicity told her.

“You’re not a white girl anymore,” she told her. “It goes back to the whole ‘Girl’s in a Fishbowl Rule’; over the years you’ve assimilated enough that you now have black girl ass. It’s the reason we can share jeans and shorts without me looking like I’m poppin’ muffins and biscuits north and south of the border all the time.”

“Muffins and biscuits,” Renee snorted.

“Now I want muffins and biscuits,” Laurel muttered.

“I swear to God, you are driving me nuts,” Renee said shaking her head.

“Anyway, it really is adorable,” Felicity said absent as she sliced up the peeled cucumber and tossed it over the lettuce before reaching for another to peel. “It even came with a little hat and rain galoshes. He’s going to look just like Paddington Bear, aren’t you Ace?” She said cooing to the dog who pawed the air again for another carrot.

“More like a regular bear,” Tam grumbled. “As in Grizzly!”

“Look, I’m sorry, but dressing dogs in clothes is just stupid. Besides, there is no way in hell that dog is going to let you put him in a rain coat much less a hat and booties,” Renee said dryly as she folded some of Bruce’s new socks.

“Thank you!” Tam told her, “And what about the teacup? I said ‘teacup’, remember? As in ‘teacup poodle’! Outside of the rides at Disneyworld, they don’t make teacups big enough for that thing!”

“Fine; if you want a tiny little dog, then get one,” Felicity told her as she dropped the rest of the cucumber slices in the large bowl before reaching for the celery next. “Get two dogs! Sara and Laurel are getting a cat.”
“But no birds, okay?” Laurel said looking at her. “A cat, maybe two, couple of dogs, fine; but if you get Sara started on birds again then this place is going to become one big huge zoo.”

“It pretty much already is! After all, Felicity got us a friggin’ elephant! If I get a little dog that thing is going to eat it!” Tam glowered, “And good luck with getting a cat; might as well just name it ‘Appetizer’ and get it over with.”

“If you get a black cat you could name it ‘Midnight Snack’ instead,” Renee joked.

Felicity shot them both a dirty look and passed the large bowl of salad to her sister who set it in the center of the table before handing her another empty bowl so she could get started on the fruit. “Ace is a perfectly well behaved dog and he loves other animals, cats in particular.”

“Yeah, for dinner,” Tam retorted, taking the peelings off the table and dumping them in the trash.

“No, not for dinner!” She scowled as she sliced up the apple and dumped in it the bowl before handing a slice to Ace who accepted it eagerly.

“Why not? He eats everything else apparently! What kind of dog eats salad?” Tam snorted. “It’s defective or something!”

“For your information, dogs are omnivores just like people and enjoy fruits and vegetables as part of a well-balanced diet,” she said smartly as she handed him another slice of apple. “I asked the guy at the pet store and he said that dogs like apples, carrots, and sweet potatoes especially, but you should never give them onions, garlic, persimmons, grapes, raisins, avocados, nuts, tomatoes, or chocolate. I bought some books, too; one that’s a kind of a general owner’s manual, a pet cookbook, and a book on Great Danes. I also got a ton of dehydrated sweet potato treats and mint flavored dog biscuits for his teeth.”

“A dog cookbook,” Tam said flatly.

“Not to, you know, cook *dogs* but as a way to supplement his diet,” she told her as she tossed in handfuls of blueberries and raspberries into the bowl then started cutting up the strawberries. “Alfred sent over plenty of his regular food but the guy at the pet store suggested I add some extra protein and veggies to his diet. I bought some brown rice, extra veggies, and some ground turkey and then I thought I might cut up some cantaloupe for his dessert since he said it really gives them a vitamin boost and helps with digestion. I figured I’d make up a bunch tomorrow and see if he likes it.”

“Yeah, but how can you be sure he really likes that stuff? I mean, the meat I get, but cantaloupe and brown rice? It’s not like he’s tasting any of it; he just gobbles it up. Maybe he’s just eating it because he assumes it’s food and he’s basically all stomach?” Renee asked dubiously.

“She has a point. I was looking at the news on my tablet and there was this Great Dane who ate forty-three and a half socks,” Laurel told her. “They had to do surgery.”

“What do you mean he ate forty-three and a *half* socks; what’s half a sock?” Renee asked her. “Like one mismatched sock or like forty-three regular socks and one of those little no show ankle socks?”

“It just said ‘half a sock’, it didn’t go into any particulars,” she said. “The point is that Great Danes apparently eat just about anything so you might want to be careful what you feed him. If I were you I’d just stick to the dry food for now and do some more research first.”

“And keep it away from the socks,” Renee muttered.
Felicity glanced at the dog, “Good point.” The dog’s ears came forward and he tilted his head to look back at her. “Geez, I hope he doesn’t get sick. That would be bad if I killed Bruce’s dog less than one day in. Then again, I wrecked Isabel’s car after owning it for less than an hour.”

“Look, you realize that if something happens and that thing pukes or has an accident how big of a mess that’s going to be? You don’t like poop,” Tam said stubbornly, “Imagine what kind of poop something that big is going to be dropping.”

“Doggie door,” She told her, pointing her knife towards the sophisticated entry way that had been installed while they were out. “The gardeners are laying the sod now so, hopefully, no poop. Plus, Alfred arranged for someone to come walk him several times a day.”

The surrounding rooftop garden was large enough to house an infinity pool, spa, as well as an entertainment area and several deck chairs. Alfred instructed the gardeners to remove much of the unnecessary furniture so they could lay two large blocks of Kentucky Blue grass, which she was told was a hearty winter sod, in slightly elevated beds that were approximately ten by twelve feet and another two much narrower strips of sod along the sides of the penthouse. In addition to the sod, they took away any plants that might be considered poisonous to house pets and replaced them with safer alternatives, added waste receptacles for his droppings, and installed a high tech dog house in the center of one of the sod beds. They also added some filtered fresh water drinking fountains that were heated slightly to avoid freezing and were connected to the water lines. Right now they were busy putting fencing around both the pool and the spa to prevent him from drinking the chemically treated water or accidently drowning.

In fact, the entire place was buzzing with activity. Tam and Zander had more than tripled the number of workmen and already she could see the place rapidly coming together with the addition of more furniture and the paint already up on some of the walls.

Not that she got to see much of the new furniture since everything was covered in tarps at the moment. Still, when she got home just seeing all the work that had already been done was enough to put a grin on her face that not even Tam’s complaining about the dog could wipe away.

As for her sister, the first thing she did when they arrived home with their massive haul of groceries, pet supplies, men’s clothing, and grill was introduce her to their new friends. Tam being Tam had Renee and Laurel acting like they were her long lost best friends within minutes while Wildcat, after a harmless round of flirting, went outside to set up the grill with Zander trailing close behind.

He managed to find something called a Kalamazoo Hybrid that was apparently every man’s fantasy grill. It ran on gas, wood, and/or charcoal and was, according to the pamphlet that came with it, thirty-eight inches and 82,500 BTUs of pure ingenuity. The minute he came in with that thing all work on the penthouse stopped while every man in the place went outside to help set it up and drool as Wildcat showed it off like a proud new papa. After the set up and ceremonial firing up of the grill, the workmen all reluctantly went back to work while the older man conquered fire along with their lunch.

Frankly, she didn’t care; all she heard was ‘rotisserie’ and she was sold. She figured if Bruce had a problem with her buying a $16,000.00 grill then she’d just remind him of the fact that he used her As Seen On TV countertop rotisserie that cost her four easy payments of $49.95 to bash Oliver over the head.

Even though they were a couple now, fiscal payback and food were still two of her favorite pastimes.

Plus, she really liked coming home to roasted chicken and a no muss, no fuss drip pan that went right
into the dishwasher. She glanced out the French doors off of the kitchen to see Wildcat adjusting knobs as he regaled the workmen with an apparently hilarious story of his many and varied adventures.

“Remind me to go online and order a countertop rotisserie,” she told her sister. “There’s no way in hell I’m going to be able to figure out how to use that thing; I can barely light a fire in the fireplace.”

“Then why did you buy it?” Tam asked in exasperation.

“I didn’t, Bruce did,” she told her as she continued to cut up fruit, “he just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Speaking of things your husband-to-be inadvertently purchased today; are you sure about these socks?” Renee asked as she held up one of the new pairs they bought that morning after leaving the car dealership. “They don’t seem like Bruce’s style to me.”

She had a point. While she picked up several pairs of replacement socks in his normal somber color palette, she figured that since she was stealing them anyway, she might as well get a few in colors she liked as well. Before long they had a cart load of men’s socks, undershirts, and boxer briefs from designers like Yohji Yamamoto, Paul Smith, and Alexander McQueen, her favorites being the ones by Robert Graham in wild colored stripes, paisley, argyle, and whimsical prints.

The other woman frowned as she held up a pair, “Bruce just doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy used to wearing hotdogs and taxi cabs on his hot pink and purple striped socks.”

“Actually, I bought those so we could steal them,” she told her as she cued up her tablet and propped it on the side of the bowl.

“Oh, well, okay then,” she shrugged and went back to folding.

“So wait, you’re still marrying Bruce?” Tam asked her. “What about Arrow McBadboy? Didn’t you tug on his bow string last night?”

Felicity paused the YouTube video she was referencing on how to cut up star fruit in order to give her sister a dirty look, “There are so many things wrong with that sentence, I don’t even know where to begin.” She frowned, “Wait; you know Oliver stayed over last night? How?”

“Yeah, of course I know he stayed over,” she said slowly. “You told me to make him up a room yourself, remember? You called me…” she reminded her with a hint of sarcasm.

“For *Laurel*!” She said in aggravation. “I told you to make the room up for *Laurel*, not *Oliver*.”

“You didn’t say ‘Laurel’, you said ‘a friend from out of town’ so I just figured it was some kind of code for ‘vigilante booty call’,” she shrugged.

“No, there was no ‘booty call’,” she told her sister. “I’m with Bruce.”

“Whatever,” Tam said poutily. “I still think he’s an asshole.”

“Bruce is definitely an asshole alright,” Renee said in agreement as she started folding t-shirts. “Plus, that could so be a code for ‘vigilante booty call’.”

“Not in Starling City, it’s not. Where Felicity and I are from, the code phrase for ‘vigilante booty call’ is, ‘So it looks like there’s a new female mask in town’,” Laurel said dryly.
“Unfortunately, she’s not wrong,” Felicity admitted reluctantly.

“I got the steaks!” Wildcat said, walking in from the cold with Zander trailing behind him. “I’m gonna put some foil over ‘em and let ‘em rest for a minute then we can eat.”

“Foil’s on the counter,” Felicity said, gesturing with her knife as she continued to cut up the fruit. “I know Bruce is an asshole but so is Oliver.”

Tam opened up the Ziploc of Chocos Laurel tossed in her direction and took out a couple before handing the bag back over to Renee, “No one is as big an asshole as Bruce, sorry.”

“Got that right,” Renee nodded as she took a cookie as well.

“God, these really are good,” Laurel said, placing a few more on a napkin then popping one into her mouth. “By the way, thank you for buying whole milk because 2% is just water that happens to be white.”

“And another thing, why didn’t you pick up any soy milk?” Tam demanded.

Felicity looked at her, “Three reasons: One, I like whole milk. Two, no one likes soy milk; people only drink that crap if they have to. And three, I was the one doing the shopping; if you want soy milk then go buy some.”

“Crabby,” Tam muttered. “Should have asked Oliver to throw you a bone; might’ve loosened you up and cleared out the cobwebs.”

Zander snorted and accepted the bag of cookies Laurel handed him then offered one to Wildcat who took it then looked over the girls seated around the table in bemusement, “What is it you gals are talkin’ about in here?”

“The fact that Bruce is an ass and Baby can do better,” Tam told him.

“I’ve never met Bruce, but to be fair Ollie’s no picnic,” Laurel assured them. “He’s a very sexy, very built hottie with abs that could make angel’s cry and who gives really, really great cookie but he can still be an asshole when he wants to be.”

“What the hell is a cookie?” Wildcat asked with a frown.

All of the women and Zander turned to look at him.

“You’re a hundred and six years old and you don’t know what a cookie is?” Renee asked.

“Honey, I’m as gay as they come and even I know what that is,” Zander said cheekily as he plopped down beside Tam.

“So what is it?” The older man asked.

Renee sighed, picked up a Choco from the napkin in front of Laurel, then showed it to him, “Cookie.”

He frowned at her, “Yeah, and?”

She made a show of twisting the cookie apart then slowly licking the creamy icing before tossing Laurel a suggestive wink, “Just to put it out there, I bet you I could give Oliver a run for his money on the cookie thing; you know, just in case you wanted to go back to college sometime.”
Laurel snickered, “Nice.”

“Oh!” Wildcat said then nodded, “Yeah, I’ve been known to make a few cookies crumble myself from time to time.”

“You’re creeping me out here, you know that, right?” Renee asked him. “It’s like listening to my grandpa talking about getting some strange during Prohibition.”

“I used to deliver Prohibition Whiskey for the local mob on my bike when I was a kid,” Wildcat mused. “I even met Lucky Luciano once; guy gave me a silver dollar for runnin’ across the street for a carton of Lucky Strikes. You know, back then that was a lot of money and when my old man found out where I got it from, he about skinned me alive even though I used it to buy a whole week’s worth of groceries instead of blowin’ it at the picture show with my buddies! Hell, the guys at the factory were only getting’ two bits an hour startin’ pay.” He gave them a crooked smile, “See, my uncle just died and I remembered my aunt gettin’ upset ‘cause bread went from a nickel to nearly eight cents a loaf so I went out an’—”

“And the fact that you can even say shit like that is the reason why you can never talk about sex in front of me ever again,” Renee said, cutting him off with a shudder.

“Your friend has a…unique sense of humor,” Zander said, turning to her and Tam in quiet confusion. “It’s almost like he really believes he’s over a hundred years old. Is he an actor or something?”

“No, he’s just got a, um, very dry wit,” Felicity told him.

“I’ll say.” Zander turned to Laurel, “So, just to make sure; you want your bedroom bright and colorful with lots of soft surfaces but you aren’t hung up on any particular style.”

“Yeah,” she said wrinkling her nose a bit. “For a long time I was all beige and orderly; I’d just like something different, you know? I want the room to be colorful and relaxing; no sleek lines or hard corners. Basically, I want something kind of fun but Zen, you know?”

“We can do that,” Zander nodded.

Tam nodded along with him, “I’m thinking a mix of modern contemporary and antiques; crisp whites, bright colors, some unexpected textures, lots of flow…”

“Like an English garden vibe with soft mosquito netting and a four-poster bed, then we can do a day spa theme in the bathroom with a bamboo wall treatment?” Zander finished for her.

“I swear to God we were separated at birth,” Tam told him in a sincere tone.

“Sweetheart, didn’t anyone ever tell you that inside every gay man lives a pissed off black woman?” He returned.

“Makes sense,” Wildcat said, reaching over to steal a strawberry from the bowl of fruit salad, “I’ve been told I’m a lesbian in a man’s body myself. It’s why my cookie eatin’ skills are so well honed,” he grinned devilishly as he threw Renee a mischievous glance.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Renee said wryly. “You’re a lesbian all right; a very muscular and hairy lesbian who doesn’t need batteries for her penis.”

“What can I say? I’m butch,” he said with a smirk.
“That reminds me, the wine bar? It definitely needs to go,” Felicity told him.

Everyone stared at her.

“How does that remind you of the wine bar?” Tam asked her.

“I went to a lesbian bar last night,” she said with a shrug.

“Without me?” Tam whined. “Damn it, now I am mad at you! Where?”

“Sirens.”

“I love Sirens,” Tam pouted. “That place is my jam on Thursdays.”

“Really?” Renee asked, perking up.

Felicity rolled her eyes, “Look, I told Sara that when everything calms down we would do a whole Fred and Ginger girl’s night on the town, happy?”

“Do I get to be Fred?” She asked her.

“Sara called dibs on Fred.”

“Actually, Sara called dibs on Gene Kelly,” Laurel reminded her.

“Fine, you can be Fred and she can be Gene,” she told her.

“Who can I be?” Renee asked.

“You can be Cyd Charisse and Laurel and I can be Ginger and Judy Garland.” Felicity told her.

“Judy Garland, huh?” Laurel said dryly, “Talk about typecasting; I get to be the drug addicted alcoholic who has a history of toxic relationships.”

“Fine, you can be Cyd Charisse and Renee can be, um…” she racked her brain for a minute, “Howard Keel.”

“Howard Keel?” Renee asked dubiously. “Wasn’t he more of a singer?”

“Fine, Danny Kaye,” she told her.

She wrinkled her nose, “Danny Kaye? Really?”

Felicity scowled, “Why am I the one who has to come up with this crap? Pick whoever you want to be and we’ll go with it!”

“I want to be Dean Martin,” Renee told her without even having to think about it.

“Dean Martin wasn’t a dancer,” Laurel pointed out.

“No, but he was the epitome of cool,” the other woman said with a smirk. “Like me.”

“I met Dean Martin once,” Wildcat mused. “Actually, I also slept with Judy Garland.” His eyes glittered naughtily, “And, believe you me, the way I had her heels clickin’ together, let’s just say I had her yelling about comin’ to Kansas in no time flat!”

Renee turned to him and pointed an accusing finger in his direction, “Okay, that just now? That was
just wrong on so many levels. This is the shit I was talking about; you just completely ruined a beloved childhood memory, so thanks for that.”

“Coulda been worse,” he told her. “I coulda said, ‘and her little dog, too.’”

Everyone at the table groaned and Renee threw a cookie at his head which he deftly caught midair and immediately popped into his grinning mouth.

“Oh, not to interrupt this confusing yet fascinating foray into 1940’s and 50’s musical icons because, hey, friend of Dorothy in the room, but are you sure you want to get rid of the bar?” Zander asked, turning to Felicity.

“You know, you don’t have to get rid of the bar for me,” Laurel told her.

“We don’t need it,” she assured her. “Bruce is the one who wanted to keep it but we’re not going to be living here, you guys are, and you shouldn’t have to deal with that kind of temptation in the house.”

“You’re in the program?” Zander asked looking towards Laurel.

She looked at him in surprise, “Yeah, you?”

“My husband,” he told her. “He actually goes to meetings near here. Remind me to give you the address before I leave.”

“Where does he go?” Renee asked curiously.

“10th Street in Midtown.”

“I go there,” she grinned.

“Yeah, Gannon always tells me they have the best coffee and doughnuts in town,” Zander returned. “And he should know from coffee and doughnuts since he’s a cop.”

“Wait, Gannon? Gannon Malloy is your husband?” She asked in surprise. “I’ll be damned! Small world; we actually worked together on the force for, like, ten whole minutes when he first transferred here. Every time we show up at the same meeting he always catches me up on all the station gossip. I knew he was married, but he always calls you ‘Deedee,’ for some reason.”

Zander flushed, “Yeah, I hate when he does that.”

“What does ‘Deedee’ stand for?” Tam asked.

He cleared his throat, “Um, ‘double digits’. The first time we hooked up, we kind of, um, broke one another’s, uh, personal best.” All eyes were suddenly on him and he shifted slightly in his chair.

Even Wildcat was giving him a second look, “Damn, I guess big things do come in small packages.” Laurel smacked his arm and he backed off, “I’m just sayin’...”

“Renee Montoya,” he said narrowing his eyes slightly before realization dawned and he gave her a sympathetic look, “I’m sorry I didn’t recognize your name right away. Gannon and I had just started dating when all that went down with you getting outed like that. He used to talk about how much it bothered him since the same thing happened to him in Bludhaven when he was just a rookie.”

“What happened?” Laurel asked, looking from one to the other.
“Same thing that usually happens when a bunch of macho cops hear there’s a queer in the bullpen,” Renee said flatly.

“Wait; what?” She asked with a scowl.

The other woman sighed, “Some cops found out I was a lesbian and they started harassing me at work then a bunch of other shit happened, I wound up getting outed and my family disowned me for it. Well, my younger brother is cool but the rest of them were afraid they might catch dyke cooties or something,” she bit out with more than a hint of bitterness. “After that I started drinking and my partner was set up by a dirty cop named Corrigan and brought up on murder charges. Allen eventually got cleared but I was gunning for the guy who set him up to begin with. I went after Corrigan time and time again but he always managed to weasel out of it and, in the meantime, things were getting tough at the station. Half the cops there hated me for being gay and the rest didn’t want to come near me because I was trying to take one of our own down. Eventually I just couldn’t take it anymore and quit; joined Vic in his PI firm instead.”

“Gannon started off in the Bludhaven PD where he was actually attacked and beaten on three separate occasions in the locker room by his ‘fellow officers’ for being gay,” Zander said in disgust. “The last time they went after him, his captain came to see him at home to let him know he was being let go due to ‘budget cuts’ but, the truth is, she wanted him out because he was becoming a ‘problem’.” He sighed, “He started drinking heavily, his longtime boyfriend left him…he and Ellis had been together forever so that was his wake up call. He moved here and got sober hoping to get him back but, by then, Ellis had moved on, so Gannon threw himself into the job.” He smiled, “That’s how we met actually. Some punks were hassling me when I was coming home from a friend’s party down in the Village and he scared them off. We’ve been together ever since.”

“Well, I’m glad you two found each other but, still; that’s bullshit,” Laurel said angrily. “He could have sued the crap out of the department for harassment and wrongful termination; both of you could have.”

Renee snorted, “It would have been one cop’s word against dozens and I guarantee you that any surveillance footage would have been conveniently ‘lost’ long before it went to trial.”

“Plus, Gannon still wanted to be a cop and he knew if he sued then no other precinct would hire him,” Zander told her. “Besides, he wound up getting a job with the GCPD where he is much happier and able to make a real difference for other gay cops. Commissioner Gordon cracked down hard on workplace harassment after gay marriage became legal in this state and charged him with starting an organization within the Force to support LGBTQ cops and their issues,” he added with a smile.

“Well, congratulations, that’s wonderful, but you still should have sued the crap out of them,” Laurel grumbled. “My dad’s a cop and, let me tell you, that shit would never fly in the SCPD.”

“East Coast versus West Coast, hot stuff,” Renee said dryly. “Besides, all of that was a few years ago and I’m over it. Corrigan’s in jail, Allen was cleared, and all is right with my world. At least all will be right once I get fed. Speaking of which, when are we going to eat?”

“Right now,” Felicity said getting up from the table to dispose of the cutting board and peelings as she set the fruit salad near the other bowl on the table.

“Good, because I’m starving,” Laurel said as she set the laundry basket aside and got up to help Felicity set the table.

“So what else is new,” Renee shot back as she retrieved the salad dressing and steak sauce from the
fridge. “Hey Zander, what kind of salad dressing do you like? We’ve got Italian, ranch, balsamic, some fruity vinaigrettes, this old man thousand island crap Uncle Teddy picked up—”

“Watch it,” Wildcat told her as he set the large platter of steaks on the table.

“Balsamic’s fine,” he told her. “Hey, I’ll be right back; I just need to tell the guys to start taking down the bar. Do you guys know what you want to do with the space instead?”

Felicity turned to him from where she was getting out the cutlery and frowned, “Not really, no.”

“Well, the bar was a really big focal point in the room,” he warned her. “You’re going to have to decide soon.”

“If you want to keep it…” Laurel began.

“No,” Felicity stopped her. “I was trying to get rid of that thing long before you planned on moving in.”

“She’s telling you the truth,” Zander assured her. “The whole wine bar concept was a compromise but, luckily, I did come up with a few alternatives just in case.”

“Like what?” Felicity asked as she and Laurel began distributing the plates and cutlery while Renee set out the salad things and went back to retrieve the drinks from the fridge.

“Well, the concept Tam and I came up with is a sort of pastiche of different styles based on some of the things she already had in storage and some furniture we found.”

“Think steampunk casual,” Tam told her. “Rich leather, shiny brass, lots of soft materials in rich colors, and a kind of Doctor Who’s library vibe with antiques and contemporary furnishings sitting side by side.”

“Doctor Who?” Felicity asked.

“Yeah,” Tam nodded. “We found some of those end tables that look like stacked books and we found a bunch of these leather bound wood and brass antique steamer trunks we can use both as storage and for décor. We also bought some really gorgeous antique carpets and we’re going to reface the fireplace since you hate modern. We wanted to go for an old English manor kind of look.”

“It sounds a bit odd but, trust me, it’ll be fabulous,” Zander assured her.

“Oh, I was sold at ‘Doctor Who’,” Felicity assured him. “So what were your other ideas?”

“Well, your sister said you liked a homey feel, that you wanted a place you could unwind, so I thought about creating a gaming area with extra seating, maybe a few burnished wood tables, an antique chess setup…”

“We found these big antique chess piece carvings,” Tam said, holding her hands apart to show the height of the sculptures. “They have that distressed old look. I was going to see if we could buy a couple just to set around as conversation pieces but we could use them to break up the room and define the space instead.” She looked at Zander, “Still, are a couple of game tables going to be enough? The bar is pretty big.”

“What about a billiard’s table?” Wildcat suggested casually.

“A billiard’s table would actually work perfectly,” Zander said, looking thoughtful. “We did find that
antique hand carved table yesterday. It’s pretty expensive though.”

“Let’s do it,” Tam said. “Besides, it’s Bruce’s money, not Felicity’s.”

“Tam, you are really going to have to let it go…” Felicity told her.

“I’m sorry, how much did that grill cost?” Tam shot back. “If you can get fiscal payback then so can I. Besides, you love playing board games and stuff.”

“Fine, do it,” Felicity told him wearily. “How long until the penthouse is done?”

“Well, since we don’t have to rebuild the bar and you’re happy with the kitchen as is, next week?” He offered.

“That fast?” She asked in surprise.

“We tripled the labor and they’re working on the fireplace and painting now, so yeah,” he told her. “A friend of mine runs an antique store and I have another friend who runs a high-end furniture place who directed us to this warehouse filled with customized furniture that for one reason or the other was never picked up. Normally they sell it at auction but he pulled some strings and offered to sell it to us directly. We’ve already moved in several pieces today but I can make a few phone calls and have him hold the pieces we talked about then move the rest of it in tomorrow. We have to let the paint dry fully before adding the faux treatments and glaze and, once that’s dry, we can start moving in some of the artwork Mr. Wayne set aside for you. I’m thinking we should be done by next Tuesday or Wednesday at the latest.”

“And we can stay in the penthouse while all that’s happening?” She asked him.

He nodded, “We’re using mostly water-based latex paint and wallpaper in the bedrooms and keeping the living areas well ventilated during the day, so yeah.”

“Fantastic,” Felicity said in relief.

“I’m just glad you’re happy,” he told her with a smile. “Be right back,” he said, slipping out of the room.

“Do you think we should have invited the workmen to come eat lunch with us, too?” Felicity asked, turning to Wildcat.

“The coals were still plenty hot so the foreman’s out there cooking everybody up a mess of burgers and dogs now, and Zander sent somebody down to the corner bodega for a bunch of chips and drinks; they’ll be fine,” he told her.

“Oh good, now I can at least eat without feeling bad,” she said placing a steak on her plate and her sister’s before passing the platter to him.

Tam turned to her sister after eyeing the dog who was now looking between them longingly as the scent of the steaks wafted through the room, “I want you to know that I am having nothing to do with that beast of yours. Nothing! As far as I’m concerned, he’s persona non grata. I’m not walking him, I’m not feeding him, I’m not even petting him.” She pouted, “And I’m getting my own teacup poodle. *And* if he eats my dog, Bruce or no Bruce, he’s going straight to the glue factory.”

“Okay, whatever; like I said, you’re free to get your own dog and Ace won’t bother it. Now excuse me while I feed *my* dog since *you* aren’t having anything to do with him,” she told her as she moved to make sure he had food in his dish.
The dog turned his large brown eyes toward Tam and tilted his head inquisitively at her.

“You’re not that cute,” Tam told him. “I’m sorry but you and me,” she gestured between them, “never gonna happen, pal.”

Ace sidled up to her and laid his head on her lap, his eyes looking up at her longingly as he whimpered.

Her lips twisted in an awkward grimace as she stared down at him, “Okay, so maybe you’re a little cute.” He butted his head against her hand and blinked at her. Tam’s chin wobbled, “Damn it, I really wanted a poodle. Why couldn’t you come with a shrink ray?”

He just yipped at her and lifted his head to lick her cheek.

“Gah! Okay, don’t do that,” she said pulling away and scratching his ears, causing the dog’s mouth to open in a panting grin. “Fine, I like you; happy now?”

“Dog biscuit?” Felicity asked, holding out a large green dog treat.

“But I still hate you,” Tam told her as she snatched the biscuit from her and handed it to Ace who gobbled it up before giving her another soulful look.

“And another one bites the dust,” she told her sister as she put some salad on her plate.

“So when are you moving in?” Renee asked Wildcat in low tones as she set his soft drink in front of him.

“Whadaya mean?” He responded innocently, using the tongs to pick out a thick rib eye.

She gave him a knowing look as she sat beside him cracking open her own diet cola, “First the grill now a pool table? It’s just a matter of time before you get your own Barcalounger and mini-fridge full of beer in front of the flatscreen.”

“Our girl’s got taste, what can I say?” He grinned. “Now all I have to do is pick up some cards and poker chips and this place might actually look like somethin’. Maybe we can even start making a regular poker night out of it. Been a while since I had a team to do that stuff with.”

“I doubt any of these girls even know how to play poker. You’d probably–,” Renee snorted as she got herself a steak then handed the plate to Laurel. She paused at the amused look on the other woman’s face. “What?”

“Nothing,” Laurel told her. “Yeah, you should definitely suggest the poker thing to Felicity. She always wanted to start a regular game back in Starling but no one would ever play with her.”

“Why not?” Wildcat asked while Renee’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“They probably just didn’t want to take all of her money even though she’s, you know, loaded,” Laurel said innocently. “If you guys do decide to start up a regular poker night, I suggest you start off slow with penny ante or matchsticks until she builds up her skill level that way you won’t feel guilty about taking advantage of her after you completely wipe her out.”

“She’s a shark, isn’t she?” Renee said flatly.

Laurel’s voice dropped to a more confidential level as she looked over to where Felicity and her sister were talking, “Ask her about the time she took down an underground mob casino by counting
cards.”

“Felicity is a card shark?” Wildcat asked with a grin. “Damn. Screw Bruce, I’m marrying that girl myself then taking her to Vegas for our honeymoon.”

“Get in line,” Renee said, shaking her head.

“Can’t,” Laurel told them, then looked at each one in turn. “She’s been banned from most casinos there. If you’re lucky you might be able to sneak her into some of the ones down in Atlantic City, but she’ll have to wear a disguise first.”

“Holy…” Wildcat said in disbelief, his eyes immediately locking onto the tiny little blonde at the end of the table.

“Oh wow,” the other woman breathed, “now that’s hot.”

Bruce stood, his back to the room, and his mind barely registering what the Wayne Publishing executives were saying about their options in regards to the lawsuit and Lois Lane’s medical condition. He’d been distracted all day long, ever since he got off the phone with Felicity that morning. It wasn’t like him; normally when he was dealing with a mission he was completely in the game, but not this time. All he could think of was Felicity and the fact that Deathstroke almost…

He shoved his clenched fists into his pockets and moved closer to the floor to ceiling bank of windows so that no one in the room would notice the expression of pure rage on his face. He touched her; that son of a bitch put his hands on Felicity and now she couldn’t even close her eyes without thinking about it, about *him*.

He lied to her when he told her he probably wouldn’t have killed him. If he had been there, if he had seen that bastard touching her and threatening to…

He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples as if fighting off a headache. God help him, he would have torn him apart with his bare hands. He could be a brutal son of a bitch, but he didn’t kill. The Batman would beat a criminal to a bloody pulp, break bones, even maim if he had to, but he always drew the line at murder. For Felicity though, he would have made an exception. The only regret he had about that was that Slade was already dead.

All day long that’s all he could think about. The image of that bastard creeping into her house, touching her while she slept; it made his stomach clench just thinking about what could have happened. Hell, what *did* happen. He still didn’t have the full story about what happened that night. For all he knew she could be lying or in denial.

“Christ,” he breathed, too low for anyone but him to hear. He swallowed the bile rising to his throat. Queen knew. All of them said the same thing, that Queen was screaming at the top of his lungs the entire time.

He tilted his head back slightly and breathed in and out slowly. God, he felt so fucking helpless right now and that wasn’t something he handled well. Being helpless, being clueless, feeling lost; How could he fix this?

Simple answer; he couldn’t.

Tim could only tell him what the others had seen but none of them were close enough to see all of it and he needed to know; if he was going to help Felicity get through this then he had to know
everything that went down that night. For weeks now he knew she was hiding something, they all were. He thought that when they revealed that she had taken out Deathstroke that was all of it only to find out that he wasn’t the only person she had to kill that night. She’d been forced to kill a man to save Detective Lance, possibly several men, then nearly killed herself taking out Deathstroke. As bad as that revelation had been, this was worse.

His mind began to replay his conversation with Dick as he’d done over and over again since he called.

He had just gotten out of the shower and was getting dressed when his cell rang.

He immediately picked up, not bothering with the formalities, “What’s going on?”

“It’s Baby…”

“Is she hurt?” He asked, muscles tensing at the other man’s tone, “I thought you said she was fine?”

“She’s not hurt,” he said quickly. “Not really.”

“What do you mean ‘not really’?” He practically growled as he began to dress hurriedly. “Do I need to get down there; is she okay?”

“As far as I can tell, but she didn’t get injured last night during the carjacking; she got hurt when she and I got into a tussle this morning in her bedroom.”

Bruce froze, jaw clenched, “Explain--now!”

He heard the draw of the other man’s breath before he spoke, “Baby had a night terror last night. I heard her crying and I went in to check on her and,” he paused. “It was bad, Bruce.”

He stopped and sat down on the bed, his heartbeat calming slightly but his muscles still tensed for a fight, “What do you mean?”

“I walked in the room and she was tossing and turning, crying out in her sleep; her clothes were soaked through with sweat and she was sobbing the words ‘no’ and ‘Slade’ over and over as she fought the covers. I went over to wake her up--which, admittedly, was a bonehead move on my part, but I’m not really used to thinking of Baby as being dangerous.”

“She’s not,” he said with a frown then corrected himself, “She has some hand to hand training under her belt but—”

“A little-- Bruce, I’m not ashamed to say she nearly kicked my ass last night,” he said flatly. “I touched her shoulder and the next thing I know she’s punching and kicking me, tossing me off her, and fighting like a hellcat. The second I backed off she rolled under the bed and was reaching for a weapon. Thankfully she came up empty, otherwise there’s no way I could have gotten to her before she got the first shot off.”

“She tried to shoot you?” He asked incredulously.

“Yeah. Like I said, there was nothing there but I’m pretty sure she thought she was reaching for a gun.”

His brow furrowed in confusion, “That doesn’t make sense.”
“All I have to go on is the way she was acting, and she was reaching for something. When she came up empty she scrambled for the nightstand and I had no choice but to stop her because if I let her get to what was in that nightstand someone was going to get hurt and I didn’t want it to be me and I certainly didn’t want to have to hurt her any more than I absolutely had to. She wound up bruising a couple of my ribs and putting one hell of a bite on my arm in the process but I managed to get her under control before it came to that.”

“What about Felicity? Is she okay? You said she took on injuries; how bad is it?”

He’d trained Dick to defend himself against friend or foe with equal ferocity and to never hold back when his life was on the line. Men, women; didn’t matter, a threat was a threat. You put them down before they can put you six feet under; that’s what he drilled into all of his protégé’s heads.

Even if the threat was Felicity.

“Did—is anything broken?”

“I…” he heard him exhale roughly, “I don’t know; I don’t think so. I was as gentle as I could be under the circumstances but she was reaching for a couple of loaded nine millimeters in the nightstand and I had no other choice but to restrain her,” he said apologetically. “I wound up putting some bruises on her wrists and slammed her finger in the drawer when I was trying to prevent her from grabbing the gun. It’s not broken, not that I could tell anyway. It might be fractured but she was moving it fine, same with her wrists, and she didn’t ask for me to take her to the hospital. The nail split all the way down to the quick and bled pretty badly but, other than that, she seemed okay.” He paused, “Has she ever done anything like this before?”

“No,” he said quietly, scrubbing his hand through his hair in aggravation. “Did she say anything afterwards?”

“Not much, that’s kind of what has me worried,” he said quietly. “As soon as she realized it was me and snapped out of it, the tears stopped and she tried pretending nothing was wrong. What the hell did Deathstroke do to her anyway?”

“All I know is what Tim told me,” he said before rubbing his hand across his mouth. “Look, I need to call Baby. In the meantime, I want you to get all the guns out of the penthouse and take them to the manor. Make sure Alfred puts them in the safe.”

“Got it; anything else?”

“No, just keep an eye on her and call me if anything else happens.”

“Sure,” there was another pause, “Bruce, I know what you told me, that she took out Slade, but something else is going on here. The way she looked…” He blew out a harsh breath, “Frankly, seeing her like that scared the hell out of me and I’m really worried about her. I think you should wrap up whatever it is you’ve got going on and get home as soon as you can.”

He stilled, “Felicity would never hurt herself if that’s what you’re implying.”

“I’m not saying she would, but Bruce; last night she shot a perp twice, ran two others over multiple times, then nearly shot me while in the midst of a night terror, and we already know she’s killed multiple people,” he said flatly. “She’s your fiancée and this is your business, not mine, but if she were my fiancée, after seeing what I saw last night...”

“Understood.” He propped his elbows on his knees and leaned forward, rubbing the heel of his hand against his furrowed brow, “Until I get back someone needs to stay with Felicity at all times.”
“Renee and I both spent the night as did Queen and Luke and she’s got a houseguest as well; Laurel Lance.”

“I don’t trust Laurel; she’s got a history of mental illness as well as drug and alcohol issues, plus she’s been aggressive towards Baby in the past. Make sure Renee knows to stick close even if she basically has to move in. Wildcat already has her covered on the inside but I want you, Luke, and Queen on surveillance and support while all this is going on. Have Luke suit up tonight and patrol while Alfred handles coms.”

“How did he not know about her night terrors before now? He knew she hadn’t been sleeping well, but how had he missed all the signs that she was scared to the point of keeping weapons at the ready in case someone came after her? Finding out about that had been almost as big a blow as finding out that Queen kissed her. Actually, it was worse since Queen all but told him what he was going to try and pull. No, the biggest blow came when Felicity told him that he had been the one keeping her monsters at bay, that him holding her in their bed was what stopped the nightmares. He realized then that his taking off to Metropolis without warning was part of the reason why she…

Fucking, that was enough to bring him to his knees with guilt right then and there.

Anything could have happened. Dick could have been killed, Felicity could have been seriously injured or killed, she could have another night terror and hurt herself or others…

He told her he trusted her and he did. He knew she wasn’t made of glass, he knew she could defend herself in a fight, but that didn’t really apply here. It was one thing to take on some muggers or gang bangers, but Dick was a trained operator.

The day Dick issued his ultimatum, ‘Give up the cowl or I’m leaving to head my own team,’ he beat him to a bloody pulp with his bare hands. He didn’t do it out of anger, he did it after issuing a counter offer of his own:

Knock me down and keep me down and the cowl is yours.

When he was done, only one of them was still standing and it wasn’t Dick. Not that he wasn’t hurting by the end of it. They were both a mass of cuts and bruises, both beaten to the point where they were almost unrecognizable, but it had been necessary. He was trying to show him that to be the Bat, to survive no matter what, he had to stop using his heart and start using his head. Being the Bat meant surviving pain, surviving torture, fighting even when all you wanted to do was quit. It meant fighting for justice, not for humanity. It meant giving up all the comforts other’s enjoyed; love, family, home, because even if it meant sacrificing the people closest to you, the mission always came
He told him that he had never met a man worthy of the cowl; not one, not even him. Everyone who ever tried to take it from him failed because they gave up. When the fight became impossible to win, when the pain became too much to bear; they quit. The Batman never quit; not even when there was no hope for salvation. He fought, and he fought, and when that wasn’t enough, he fought even harder.

He hit him over and over again, the two of them exchanging blow after punishing blow, while he told him that if he wanted to be the Bat then he had to prove he could take it from him first. Every time Dick put him down, he got back up. Every time he put Dick down, he got up as well. They fought for hours, they fought until their skin hung in bloody remnants over their knuckles. They fought until Dick called it and finally gave up.

True to his word, Dick got up, spat a tooth out onto the floor, and limped out of his life and the team, but not before telling him that if being the Bat meant becoming something less than human, if it meant becoming the man Bruce had become, then he could keep it.

Yesterday was the first time they’d spoken in over a year without Alfred or Tim acting as an intermediary. Truth be told, he was surprised that Dick even bothered picking up the phone when he called but then all he had to say was that he needed him, that Baby needed both of them, and he was back and acting as though no time had passed at all. That was the magic of Felicity; just the mere mention of her name could bridge the gap between them and bring their family back together again.

That said, it didn’t escape his notice that when he offered Dick the cowl he neither accepted nor refused. It was pretty obvious that he didn’t quite believe that he was retiring but he meant what he said; he could no longer be the Bat and be with Felicity. He gave her up once for the cowl, but he wouldn’t make the same mistake twice; he couldn’t, not anymore.

The choice had been made and, as far as he was concerned, Felicity was now the only mission that mattered.

It was all he could do not to hop a plane after Dick called him that morning to tell him what happened. All day he’d been distracted, tense, and moody as hell. He knew it showed, too; even Lucius was beginning to lose patience with him.

His mind flashed back on that night they shared right before he made his intentions clear to her. She took off her coat and stood in the center of the room in a barely there tuxedo jacket that seemed to hug every curve, looking like... God, she looked like every damn fantasy he never even knew he had until that very moment.

He couldn’t help himself; he just reached out for her and began to show her in actions what he wasn’t quite ready to put into words because, once he said them, he could never take them back. He began making love to her; sweet, slow love, the kind of love one could build a life upon. It was the coward’s way out, for sure, but he didn’t want to have to make the sacrifices keeping her would force him to make. He convinced himself that as long as he made no promises, if she stayed, he could have his cake and eat it too.

Despite all his plans though, as soon as he entered her an overwhelming urge came over him. It was like an intense compulsion, an absolute need to say the words and hear her response.

Tell me you belong to me.

At that moment it was no longer just him in bed with the woman he loved; it became a marriage of
souls. This odd feeling flowed through him, it was almost as though his entire being vibrated with those words and something deep inside of him knew if she answered him, if she told him what he needed to hear, that their bond would be set.

At that moment, he would have given anything, done anything, just to hear her tell him that she was his then ask him the same in return. And he would have answered her with a 'yes'; he would have told her in no uncertain terms that he lived inside of her and she inside of him. It sounded like poorly written romantic tripe, but there was some sort of strange power in those words that he recognized on a purely instinctual level. As soon as he said them, he felt a thrum of electricity run through his veins and it was as though their souls locked onto one another.

It wasn’t just want, it wasn’t just some kind of impulse or power play; he needed to hear her say it more than he’d ever needed anything in his entire life…and then she started shaking and he knew something was wrong. At the time, she wouldn’t talk about it but now he knew. His words; words that, at the time, seemed as holy and sacred as any prayer or heartfelt vow before family and friends, had been permanently corrupted by Slade Wilson.

If there was a hell then he hoped that son of a bitch was burning in it.

He watched her sleep that night. It wasn’t a fitful sleep, she barely even moved, still something told him that she needed him there to keep the monsters at bay. He lay in bed with her head on his chest and his hand stroking down her bare back and, even though knew that his days of being the Batman would be done the second he whispered those three words out loud, he said them anyway. He needed to erase the ghosts in the room and they were his talisman; his most secret source of strength. He said the words and felt all his doubts drift away from that moment on.

The walls had come down the minute he saw her tears, saw the pain his selfishness had inflicted, and he knew that there was no turning back. He told Dick long ago that the Bat couldn’t serve two masters, you had to choose; it was the mission or the girl, you couldn’t have both. That night he closed his eyes, his arms around the woman he belonged to, and let go of the Bat without so much as a second thought.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and glared at the Metropolis skyline, wishing to hell he was back home with her. Instead, here he was, staring out of a window, his mind engrossed on only one thing and it sure as hell wasn’t the mission or the cowl. If one of his team was acting this out of sorts then he’d bench them on the spot. Dick was right, he needed to get this done and go home because he was no good to anyone, least of all her, if he couldn’t stay focused on the job at hand.

They visited Lois in the hospital that morning but, as expected, she wasn’t much help. She was still druggy and confused, barely able to even recognize her boyfriend, a foreign correspondent with The Daily Planet by the name of Jonathan Carroll.

Not that Carroll seemed particularly concerned about her, he thought disgustedly. The minute he stepped into the room with Lucius and Josiah Power, the man began talking over a very confused Lois and practically tripped over himself to explain exactly why he’d be perfect for the anchor chair should the network deal go through. After Carroll interrupted Lois for the third time with a story about some nonsense he and his ‘good buddies’ Wolf Blitzer and Snapper Carr got into while on assignment, he seriously thought about punching him just to shut him up.

Finally, after Lucius realized he was at his breaking point, he dove onto the sacrificial sword and led the babbling idiot away so he could ask his questions without being constantly interrupted. Even so, he really didn’t learn anything. All she had was a hazy recollection about Luthor and Mallory courting Miller over some kind of proposed government contract but she couldn’t remember what for. The only useful thing she could remember was that her ‘source’ (who she still couldn’t
remember, not even if it was a man or woman) first contacted her because of some kind of experimental aircraft engine LuthorCorp was supposedly developing and that Miller was putting pressure on them to do something but, again, she couldn’t remember that part either. All she knew was that when she began investigating the allegations, she stumbled on the rest of it.

He wanted to try pressing her further but then Carroll came back in the room and, unable to deal with him and getting nothing more of value out of Lane, he finally gave up and abruptly cut off the other man’s steady stream of self-aggrandizement to tell Lucius they needed to get the show on the road if they were going to make it to Metropolis by that afternoon.

Now he was worried that he might have let his temper get the best of him. He should have just taken charge of the room and told Carroll to get the hell out. He grimaced, he felt off-kilter and it was pissing him off. Lois was a bust and this whole damn trip felt like a waste of time. If Mallory couldn’t give him any answers then--

“What’s going on with you, Bruce?” Lucius asked in low tones as he came to stand beside him at the window.

Bruce glanced over at him in mild surprise then looked behind him at the empty conference room. Son of a bitch, he thought, “When did the meeting break up?”

“Five minutes ago, not that you noticed. I told everyone to take a break and said we’d get back to it after lunch,” the older man said quietly. “Now what’s really going on; the last time you were this distracted the Joker was back in town.” Bruce started slightly and Lucius chuckled, “Relax, I activated a device to block any listening equipment the minute we entered the conference room.” He removed what appeared to be a normal stylus from his pocket and showed him the blinking green light.

“That’s the new tech Snyder was working on,” he observed quietly.

He nodded, “It blocks all incoming and outgoing cell transmissions and detects any and all listening devices within a set radius. Had there been any active devices present the light would turn red. However, even if it misses any bugs in the room, it sends off a high pitched signal well outside the range of human hearing that will register as massive amounts of feedback until I shut it down.” He gave him a pointed look, “This is Metropolis; I don’t even trust our own offices this close to Luthor and the last thing we need is a leak right now.” He looked at him, “It’s not Joker, is it? They never did find his body.”

“No,” he said quietly, “I don’t know what it is but I don’t like being this far away from Gotham while all this is happening. I asked Baby to fly down here this morning but she wouldn’t budge.” He glared at the Metropolis skyline again as if willing it to change.

The other man’s expression grew apprehensive, “Is she in danger?” Bruce’s lack of an answer caused the older man to tense up, “Is it because…?”

“I don’t know,” he said honestly.

“What the hell is going on, Bruce?” Lucius asked angrily in hushed tones.

He took a deep breath, “I found out a few weeks ago that Baby had a hit put on her a year and a half ago. I don’t know any more than that but I do know, even though it was canceled, she’s been targeted recently by a potentially dangerous organization.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this when you first found out about it?” He demanded.
“I was hoping that when I brought her home the danger would pass. I was pretty sure the real person they were after was Queen, not Baby; I still am actually only now I suspect they might be going through her to get to me as well.”

Lucius’s jaw tightened, “Who is after her, and why would they be targeting Baby to get to Queen?”

“Let’s just say that it turns out Queen and I have a few things in common.”

Lucius looked at him blankly for a second before realization dawned, “That’s the reason you agreed to go through with the Queen Consolidated proposal?” He shook his head, “You should have told me Bruce.”

“Probably,” he admitted.

“No ‘probably’ about it,” he said through gritted teeth. “If Baby was in danger then I had the right to know.”

“She’s safe,” he assured him. “Luke and the rest of my team are watching her now.”

“Then why do you look so worried?”

“Because it’s Baby,” he told him.

The other man huffed in frustration but nodded in understanding, “If you had told me what was happening I wouldn’t have insisted you join me on this trip. I would have told you to stay with my daughter instead.”

“I would’ve had to come anyway,” he said reluctantly.

“Why?”

“Because the people targeting Baby are also connected to the Miller thing somehow,” he said grimly. His expression darkened, “How?”

“I don’t know yet but whatever it is, Isabel Rochev is the common denominator.”

Lucius furrowed his brow in surprise, “Why would she be going after Baby and what does this have to do with the Special Projects Division?” Bruce shook his head silently and the other man sighed, “Fine, you can tell me on the plane. Let’s just wrap this up and we’ll head back as soon as the meeting breaks.”

“There are a few things I need to do while we’re in town first,” he said quietly. “If you want to head back early though--”

“I’m staying,” Lucius told him, his eyes glittering dangerously.

“Lucius…” he began.

“If you’re here to investigate the people targeting Baby then I’m staying,” he said firmly. “I can act as your back up.” Bruce looked at him pointedly and he grimaced, “Look, I might not be able to help you in the field, but I can at least offer some kind of tech support while I’m here.”

Bruce nodded curtly, “Fine. Barbara’s in Starling anyway and I could use someone on coms since Baby won’t be able to handle them tonight and Luke is going to be busy.”
“Who has Watchtower?”

“Alfred.”

“Good,” he said, his expression relaxing slightly even though he still looked and sounded more than a little perturbed. “Of course, as soon as we get out of here you’re briefing me on everything, understood?”

“Goes without saying,” he said in a less than enthusiastic tone.

Lucius eyed him warningly, “I realize that you’re used to calling all the shots, Bruce; especially when it comes to ‘special projects’, but if you’re as determined to marry my daughter as you say you are, then you’d better get used to the fact that I’m going to be on you like white on rice from here on out,” he said in a mildly threatening tone of voice. “I may have given you a hell of a lot of space in the past but this is the dawning of a new age, my friend; understood?”

“Understood,” Bruce nodded. He watched as Lucius walked over to the conference table and shut his tablet and laptop down before slipping them into his briefcase. He rubbed his hand over his mouth and eyed the other man warily for a moment, “There’s something else…”

“What is it?” He asked, looking up.

“I talked to Baby and told her what we discussed last night,” he gave Lucius a pained look.

The other man grimaced and sighed, “Let me guess, I’m going to catch hell when I get home?”

“If it helps, I caught the lion’s share of it last night then first thing this morning,” he told him.

Lucius chuckled briefly, “Yeah, well, get used to that; her mother could be just as stubborn when she wanted to be.”

“Look, she understands the media strategy thing and we both agree with you that it would be better to wait the six months,” he said reluctantly. “However, Baby doesn’t want anyone issuing any press releases until all of this other stuff is settled first so we’d appreciate it if you didn’t go to Danny just yet.”

The other man offered him a look of grudging respect, “Okay.”

“Thank you,” he said, sticking his hands in his pockets, his expression still troubled.

“Did something happen between the two of you?”

Bruce glanced up at him, “It’s that obvious, huh?”

“You just have that look every man gets when the woman he loves gives him hell for the first time after he proposes,” he said knowingly. “Plus, Baby is her mother’s daughter and the first time Evie and I had a fight after I asked her to marry me I was absolutely convinced she was going to leave me. I thought for sure that I had made the biggest mistake of my life and wound up calling every florist in town to try to make up for it.”

“Did that help?” He asked hopefully.

“Nope,” he told him. “It just made her even madder. She told me that all she wanted was me, not a bunch of expensive flowers, and that the next time I wanted to apologize I should just try talking to her instead of spending six thousand dollars on roses.”
“So you’re saying I should go with plan B then?” He said wryly.

“Eh, a few flowers couldn’t hurt. By the way, she likes sunflowers and irises, and if you send roses make sure to send a mix of bright colors. Also, make sure they smell like something otherwise she’ll get mad because, according to her, what’s the point of spending money on real flowers if they smell like they’re made out of plastic,” he said with a grin then gave him an assessing look. “You know Bruce, I wasn’t really thrilled about the idea of you marrying Baby before, but I can see how much you really do love her.” He took a deep breath, “The man I used to know wouldn’t have let anyone or anything get between him and whatever it was he was pursuing. He certainly wouldn’t be staring out the window in absolute misery because he messed up things with his girl when he should be focused on the business at hand.”

He looked at him in mild surprise, “So does that mean I have your blessing?”

“It means I’ll think about it,” he told him, then added, “As long as you get your head out of that window and back on my daughter’s safety where it belongs.”

Bruce thought back on their conversation and frowned, “Probably doesn’t matter anyway, I’m pretty sure she’s not going to agree to marry me anytime soon.”

Lucius snorted, “Son, my daughter has been in love with you since she was four years old. Just swallow your pride, apologize, and get done what you need to get done here so you can make up for it in person.”

Bruce glanced at the other man hopefully, “So we’re good?”

He nodded, “I still want to know everything that’s been going on and I’m not happy that you kept all of this under wraps, but as long as you two are taking this seriously I’m good with it. I can’t say I’m overly enthused with the idea of the two of you living together though.” As Bruce began to object he waved him off, “However, given what I now know, I understand why you’d want her to move into the manor. Just remember that other thing we talked about,” he said pointedly.

“I promise we have no intentions of starting a family until after the wedding,” he assured him. “I think Baby wants to go the adoption route first anyway.”

“Glad to see that you were paying attention,” Lucius told him. “To that, at least. What about what we were discussing at the meeting?”

“Honestly, it was all in one ear and out the other,” he admitted.

“I thought so,” he said with a slightly disapproving look. “Basically even the executives at Wayne Publishing are pushing for us to sell to Edge. He might be a smug bastard but he’s got deep pockets and his focus is actually on media whereas Wayne Enterprises is known more for our tech. The only reason we bought the Planet was for the prestige and having it under our banner doesn’t really serve that purpose anymore; especially with this Miller thing hanging over our heads. It’s barely breaking even and, win or lose, this thing is going to cost us big time. We already have advertisers pulling their ads because they want to distance themselves from the scandal.”

Bruce rubbed the back of his neck tiredly, “Fine; tell them I’ll take it under consideration and put together some numbers for me to look at.”

“You’re sure?” He asked.

“You said it yourself; it’s business, not personal,” Bruce nodded. “I don’t like the idea of selling to Edge but if the numbers are right, I’ll let it go.” Lucius looked at him and chuckled. “What?”
The older man smirked, “It’s just that Baby has been a bigger influence on you than I ever could have imagined.”

His brow furrowed in confusion, “What does me letting the paper go have to do with her?”

“Yesterday you were adamant about the fact that you wouldn’t give up the paper no matter what, but today you’re actually willing to compromise and listen to the advice of your executives. The Bruce Wayne I know is a stubborn pain in the ass who rarely if ever compromises on anything so either you’re Bruce Wayne’s doppelgänger or Baby has left her mark on you after all.”

Clark sat in the bullpen pretending to work while he eavesdropped on the conversation going on two floors above. The high pitched whine had been annoying at first but he managed to filter it out just in time to hear the meeting break up then listen as Bruce Wayne and Lucius Fox began speaking in private.

It was unethical on so many levels to use his abilities for personal gain but, in this case, he made an exception. Not only was the paper in jeopardy but someone was responsible for the attack on Lois and he needed to find out who. The obvious choice would be Miller himself, but this was outside of his usual MO. The former senator would be more likely to employ intimidation or blackmail rather than stage a very public attack that only served to place more attention upon him and his crimes. No, if he were a betting man he’d put his money on Luthor being behind it.

Lex Luthor brought the term ‘ruthless’ to a whole other level. On the surface he was just another successful businessman, his wealth and resources comparable to that of Bruce Wayne with Wayne being ahead of him but not by much. As of last year, Wayne took fourth place and Luthor fifth in Forbes rankings of the fifteen wealthiest people in the world. He was an investigative journalist, not a finance reporter, but after doing a little recon with Clinton Stark from the business section, he was fairly certain that when the new rankings came out, Wayne was set to jump two slots ahead with Luthor still right on his heels. These men had a bone deep rivalry going on and, according to Clinton, Luthor loathed Wayne with a passion. Time and time again the two of them had gone head to head only to see Wayne Enterprises capture the brass ring. Even Clinton readily pointed out that Lois’s breakdown not only placed both her and the paper’s credibility in jeopardy, it would also affect Wayne Enterprise’s bottom line.

Did he think that besting Bruce Wayne was enough motive to stage such a public attack? Knowing Luthor, probably, but the fact was, until Lois collapsed and was unable to submit her evidence to the committee, he was scheduled to testify and possibly face criminal sanctions. The fact that he was also using this as an opportunity to get his hands on the paper and away from Wayne was telling as well. The only problem with that theory was that he wasn’t the one offering the highest bid, Morgan Edge was.

Morgan Edge was the antithesis of Lucius Fox in every way that counted. Sure, like Fox, he was a black man born into poverty who became a self-made billionaire. He was a brilliant strategist and someone with the reputation of being able to spin straw into gold but, unlike Lucius Fox who was considered to be a man of impeccable honor, Edge was almost as ruthless as Luthor both in his personal and his professional life. He wielded his media empire like a club, using it to damage the reputations of anyone he felt was standing in his way. He didn’t care about the truth, just the bottom line, and if he bought The Daily Planet from Wayne, he’d turn it into another rag like the Globe with slick photo spreads and celebrity gossip smeared all over the pages with bylines of so-called journalists who would think nothing of damaging The Planet’s reputation with sensationalist headlines and yellow journalism.
He tried listening in again and winced, resisting the urge to rub at his ear. Whatever the hell that was making that noise was starting to give him a migraine.

//--This is Metropolis; I don’t even trust our own offices this close to Luthor and the last thing we need is a leak right now.// That was Lucius Fox’s voice, //It’s not--// The whining escalated for a second and he closed his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose until he could filter out the sound again.

//--I don’t know what it is but I don’t like being this far away from Gotham while all this is happening. I asked Baby to fly down here this morning but she wouldn’t budge.//

That was Wayne.

//--Is she in danger?// Fox again. //Is it because…?//

//--I don’t know.//

Clark opened a search on any and all women closely associated with Wayne who went by the nickname ‘Baby’, but came up empty. There were plenty of women associated with Wayne throughout the years, but the last ‘public’ relationship he had was with a reporter named Charlotte Rivers and he very much doubted she was who he was referring to.

He actually met Charlotte once…sort of. She and Lois squared off at a press conference and he got to see the two of them sharpen their verbal claws on one another. Even from what little he knew about the woman, he seriously doubted she would appreciate being referred to as ‘Baby’ by anyone.

//--What the hell is going on, Bruce?//

“Good question,” Clark muttered.

//--I found out a few weeks ago that Baby had a hit put on her a year and a half ago. I don’t know any more than that but I do know, even though it was canceled, she’s been targeted recently by a potentially dangerous organization.//

His jaw tightened and he stopped typing, all of his attention now focused on the conversation going on above him.

//--Why didn’t you tell me about this when you first found out about it?//

//--I was hoping that when I brought her home the danger would pass. I was pretty sure the real person they were after was Queen, not Baby; I still am actually only now I suspect they might be going through her to get to me as well.//

Queen? As in Oliver Queen? He began typing again and running another search on Queen and the women in his life but, again, no ‘Baby’.

One thing was for sure, if whoever attacked Lois was going after both Queen and Wayne by targeting this woman then it definitely had something to do with Miller. Not only that, but intimidation tactics like going after family members was both Miller and Luthor’s MO to a T.

//--Who is after her, and why would they be targeting Baby to get to Queen?//

Another good question, “Should’ve been a journalist,” he said under breath as he continued to run checks on Queen.
“I wish I could find out what.”

On the surface, Wayne and Queen were complete opposites. Queen dropped out or was kicked out of four different colleges even though he was regarded as being highly intelligent, while Wayne had multiple degrees and was a certified genius. He looked at his bio carefully; Oxford and Ivy League educated with advanced degrees in law, business, biology, chemistry, criminology, physics, and computer science in addition to lesser degrees in criminal justice, engineering, and forensic sciences.

“That’s a…bit unusual.” The law and business degrees were a no brainer, one could even argue the criminology, criminal justice, and forensics degrees were understandable if he intended to go into criminal law, but as a whole it didn’t really make sense unless he was just a professional student, which he most definitely was not. By the time he was twenty-three he graduated from Yale Law to begin a five year tour around the world. The fact that he managed to accomplish all of that at such a young age was astounding.

Queen, on the other hand, was the male version of Paris Hilton by twenty-one (only with less of a work ethic) then spent the next five years trapped on a desert island.

Another prime example of how they were complete opposites was the evolution of both men’s reputations and public personas:

While Queen was a partier who became a complete straight arrow five years later, Wayne was a studious monk who returned to Gotham a ladies man. He spent the rest of his twenties going through starlets and supermodels like they were going out of style while Queen managed to stay out of the gossip rags as much as he possibly could despite his mother’s trial and subsequent campaign for mayor that ended with her death.

Wayne was no longer a player however and that was what was making it so difficult to figure out who he was talking about. There was virtually nothing written about his personal life, not recently anyway. His playboy days abruptly ended approximately five years ago when he adopted a boy who was rumored to be his biological son, Damian Wayne.

Clark looked at the photo on his screen and frowned. According to this the boy died from a long term illness that had been previously undisclosed to the public. Officially his doctor, Leslie Thompkins, ruled that he died from an intracranial hemorrhage which was worsened by Hemophilia Type-A. They administered a clotting factor after he fell and bumped his head while playing with the family dog which then caused an adverse reaction and he subsequently died right there in the clinic.

Sad, he thought as he glanced back up at the picture of the young boy. The child wasn’t smiling at all, his eyes curiously blank even though he was standing in front of a lavishly decorated tree and surrounded by brightly packaged presents. When he was a kid he would have been all over that but, then again, when he was ten he’d never been forced to wear a three piece suit while posing for a photo shoot when all he really wanted to do was go play.

//That’s the reason you agreed to go through with the Queen Consolidated proposal? You should have told me Bruce.//

//Probably.//

Where in the heck did this kid even come from? He thought to himself.

He tried finding any information on the boy’s mother but came up empty. Whoever she was she
didn’t even bother showing up to his funeral which was attended only by Wayne’s other adopted sons, Richard Grayson and Timothy Drake-Wayne, as well as Alfred Pennyworth, Bruce Wayne’s guardian, and the Fox family. Maybe his mother was dead? Had to be, he thought, what kind of mother wouldn’t attend her own child’s funeral unless she physically wasn’t able to? But if she were dead then it stood to reason that she couldn’t be ‘Baby’ either.

Maybe she wasn’t dead? Maybe she was the link between Queen and Wayne but all the women Queen was publicly associated with had never so much as crossed paths with Wayne either.

The only thing he could find linking Wayne and Queen was Miller. From what he could see, the men had never so much as met before then. Queen’s mother, Moira, attended a few Wayne Foundation Galas some years before her death but none in the last decade or so.

//No ‘probably’ about it. If Baby was in danger then I had the right to know.//

He began another search, this time on Lucius Fox and anyone connected to him called ‘Baby’ but, again, came up empty.

//She’s safe. Luke and the rest of my team are watching her now.//

His team? Meaning his security detail? It wasn’t unusual for men of Wayne’s wealth to have a bodyguard or two but he’d always eschewed them in the past despite owning one of the most elite private security firms in the world. If he had an entire team guarding this one woman then he must think this threat is both very real and serious.

//Then why do you look so worried?//

//Because it’s Baby.//

He scowled and wished they’d just stop referring to this mystery woman as ‘Baby’ so he’d have something better to go on. Maybe ‘Baby’ was his daughter? He knew Wayne had taken in a few foster children over the years but the only girl he officially took temporary guardianship of was a foster daughter named ‘Stephanie Brown’ who died a few years ago after she aged out of the system and left his care. According to her death certificate, again signed by their family physician, Dr. Leslie Thompkins, she died from surgical complications when her appendix ruptured.

He felt another wave of sympathy for the man. First his foster daughter dies, then his son dies just a year or so later? No wonder he left the public eye for almost five months following Damian’s funeral. Officially, the Wayne family’s publicist issued a statement saying he was doing charity work for his Foundation but he could definitely see where the rumors that were going around about how he’d had a nervous breakdown came from. There was even a Globe article claiming that he’d gone to a psychiatric clinic in Switzerland, but Wayne returned just in time to file a libel lawsuit which he won only to donate the full amount of the settlement to two children’s charities not directly associated with the Wayne Foundation; the CJ Wilson Children’s Charity that funds programs to provide education and emotional support to children suffering from chronic illnesses, and Cure4theKids which provides free or low cost care at The Children’s Specialty Center and the Hemophilia Treatment Center, and funds medical research into the disease.

Clark scowled, even if he had a nervous breakdown over his children’s deaths, the fact that Edge would even run with something like that was just one more reason why he really didn’t want to work for the man.

//If you had told me what was happening I wouldn’t have insisted you join me on this trip. I would have told you to stay with my daughter instead.//
Wait—

He went back to the tab he had on Fox and noticed that he had a daughter named ‘Tamara’. He began a search on Tamara Fox and noted that, although she was an executive with Wayne Entertainment, she and Wayne were rarely photographed together. However, there were several photos linking her romantically with Wayne’s son, Timothy Drake-Wayne.

Maybe Tamara was ‘Baby’? It was possible, but somehow he doubted it. The last press photo of her and his son was fairly recent and they appeared to still be very much involved. Maybe he was misreading his tone of voice. Maybe it wasn’t a romantic relationship but more of an avuncular one?

//I would’ve had to come anyway.//

//Why?//

//Because the people targeting Baby are also connected to the Miller thing somehow.//

Confirmation, Clark thought nodding to himself. Only why would someone working with the Entertainment Division be connected to the LexCorp scandal or Queen Consolidated?

He ran a search on Oliver Queen to find a possible link between him and Tamara Fox.

//How?//

//I don’t know yet but whatever it is, Isabel Rochev is the common denominator.//

Clark paused.

Isabel Rochev. Her name came up in Lois’s investigation of Miller and LexCorp. Lois had Jimmy hack into her work emails (despite his objections) but came up empty. Could she have missed something? He searched for a link between ‘Isabel Rochev’ and ‘Tamara Fox’.

Nothing, “Damn it,” he muttered to himself then winced as his control slipped slightly and his ears began to buzz unpleasantly once more. This was starting to get really tiresome and that damn whining noise at the edge of his hearing wasn’t helping matters any. What the hell was doing that anyway?

He directed his gaze towards the ceiling and scanned the room two floors above him. Luckily the office directly below the conference room was empty and he was able to locate the device in the older of the two men’s possession fairly quickly. Unfortunately, he couldn’t do anything about it without burning a hole through two floors and Lucius Fox’s breast pocket.

He wiped his hand over his mouth in frustration and did his best to ignore the sound once again.

//Why would she be going after Baby and what does this have to do with the Special Projects Division?//

Special Projects Division? Was that where they were building the satellite’s components? He searched Wayne Enterprises and came up with the name ‘Dr. Greg Snyder’ with R&D at WayneTech, sometimes referred to by Dr. Snyder in interviews as the ‘Experimental Division’, but no ‘Special Projects Division’.

“It’s almost like they’re deliberately talking in code,” he grumbled to himself.

//Fine, you can tell me on the plane. Let’s just wrap this up and we’ll head back as soon as the
meeting breaks. //

//There are a few things I need to do while we’re in town first. If you want to head back early though--//

//I’m staying.//

//Lucius…//

//If you’re here to investigate the people targeting Baby then I’m staying. I can act as your back up.//

Back up? Was Wayne planning on pursuing this himself? He pressed his fingers against his forehead and sighed. Great, now not only did he have to go after Mallory later but he had to keep an eye on Wayne so he didn’t go and get himself killed.

//Look, I might not be able to help you in the field, but I can at least offer some kind of tech support while I’m here.//

//Fine. Barbara’s in Starling anyway and I could use someone on coms since Baby won’t be able to handle them tonight and Luke is going to be busy.//

‘Help him in the field’? ‘Coms’?

“God save me from weekend warriors who think playing paintball at the company retreat means they’re trained Marines now,” he sighed.

This was not going to end well.

//--Who has Watchtower?//

//--Alfred.//

Watchtower? What the hell was Watchtower? Was that the code name for the weapon’s tracking system they were developing? Was Wayne planning on using it to track down whoever was threatening Tamara Fox?

Now he really was worried. As far as anyone officially knew, the satellite being developed by Wayne Corp was supposed to be some sort of revolutionary GPS system for military use in tanks and drones but what if it was weaponized as well? Could he be planning an assassination of some sort?

No, he thought quickly dismissing the thought. The satellite was still in development but he and Queen had other satellites that were presumably capable of using that type of software. Queen Consolidated was built on its revolutionary cellular technology and sat phones while WayneTech specialized in advanced weapons systems. What if the two men hired someone to take out Luthor or were planning to do it themselves in order to minimize the risk? Was that why Wayne came along at the last minute and why he and Queen unexpectedly came together on that deal?

It was a longshot but suddenly he wasn’t feeling as sympathetic towards Bruce Wayne as he was just a few moments before.

//--Good. Of course, as soon as we get out of here you’re briefing me on everything, understood?//

//--Goes without saying.//

Admittedly, he’d never met Lucius Fox, but from everything he’d heard Perry say about the man he doubted he’d be involved in some kind of assassination plot. Of course, if they were going after his
daughter…

But then why not just go to the police or have Wayne Security handle it in-house? Why else would Wayne handle something like this personally instead of using the other options available to him unless he was planning on doing something illegal and potentially dangerous?

//I realize that you’re used to calling all the shots, Bruce; especially when it comes to ‘special projects’, but if you’re as determined to marry my daughter as you say you are, then you’d better get used to the fact that I’m going to be on you like white on rice from here on out. I may have given you a hell of a lot of space in the past but this is the dawning of a new age, my friend; understood?//

Clark’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, so his first impression wasn’t wrong then. Not only was Wayne making time with his own son’s girlfriend but he intended to marry her. He gave a slight shudder of distaste at the thought. That was just…wrong.

//Understood.//

He looked at the picture of Tamara Fox and Timothy Wayne again. Someone took a picture of them kissing and laughing outside of a club in Gotham less than a couple of weeks ago and it definitely didn’t look like future step-mom and step-son bonding to him.

No way, he thought. He had to be missing something.

//There’s something else…//

//What is it?//

Clark’s ears perked up.

//I talked to Baby and told her what we discussed last night.//

//Let me guess, I’m going to catch hell when I get home?//

//If it helps, I caught the lion’s share of it last night then first thing this morning.//

And nothing. He was really tempted to hit his head on his keyboard repeatedly at this point but he’d probably just wind up breaking his desk or sending it through the floor then have to explain what happened to Perry.

‘Termites’ could only do so much.

//Yeah, well, get used to that; her mother could be just as stubborn when she wanted to be.//

He looked back at the Forbes and Newsweek’s bio’s of Fox and noticed he was married twice but they still only listed one daughter, Tamara.

//Look, she understands the media strategy thing and we both agree with you that it would be better to wait the six months. However, Baby doesn’t want anyone issuing any press releases until all of this other stuff is settled first so we’d appreciate it if you didn’t go to Danny just yet.//

//Okay.//

//Thank you.//

Danny? Dan Burney, Wayne’s head of public relations? If Baby was Tamara then no wonder they wanted things to cool down first. Even so, that was going to be a media crapstorm.
“Did something happen between the two of you?”

“It’s that obvious, huh?”

“Now it is,” Clark muttered with an arched eyebrow.

He tried to picture his own father dating his high school girlfriend, Lana, and shuddered.

He would not want to be at that house for Thanksgiving next year, that’s for sure.

“You just have that look every man gets when the woman he loves gives him hell for the first time after he proposes. Plus, Baby is her mother’s daughter and the first time Evie and I had a fight after I asked her to marry me I was absolutely convinced she was going to leave me. I thought for sure that I had made the biggest mistake of my life and wound up calling every florist in town to try to make up for it.”

Wait…

He frowned and went back to the screen with the information he’d pulled up on Evelyn Fox.

“Did that help?”

“Nope. It just made her even madder. She told me that all she wanted was me, not a bunch of expensive flowers, and that the next time I wanted to apologize I should just try talking to her instead of spending six thousand dollars on roses.”

Evelyn Smoak-Fox, born 1972, died 1995 of complications from Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. She was only twenty-three, Clark noted sadly.

There was a lot of tragedy in both the Wayne’s and the Fox’s lives. “Guess money can’t buy you everything,” he murmured to himself as he remembered his own mother’s frequent utterances on the subject.

Evelyn Smoak and he married in August of 1992 under a bit of scandal. Most of the ‘legitimate’ press like The Daily Planet either ignored it or only made a brief note of the marriage in the society or business sections, but the gossip rags went after the woman he married like she should be walking around town with a scarlet ‘A’ pinned to her chest.

He opened another link that contained her bio along with examples of her work. He wasn’t much of an art fan. He appreciated it, but he never really had the time to wander through museums or art galleries. Still, he knew what he did and didn’t like; ‘yes’ to stuff that looked like stuff and ‘no’ to random paint splatters and banana peels on pedestals. He clicked on the JPEG of a painting Fox donated to the Leukemia Foundation that was purchased by Bruce Wayne a few years ago, his eyes appreciatively taking in the child’s laughter and the way the light danced over her white blonde hair.

Now this he liked.

It was a beautiful painting, so much so that he stopped listening to their conversation for a moment while he took in all the details. Even in a photograph he could tell that she had been an incredibly talented artist.

“My Happiness,” he said out loud as he read the caption below the photo.

He clicked on an expanded view of the painting as well as an article written about both the painting and the artist herself.
‘My Happiness’ is one of the last paintings ever completed by the artist in her all too brief career. Touted by many critics as her masterpiece, many have compared her use of light to Vermeer’s use of shadow rather than to the more commercial artists like Thomas Kincade whose paintings can come off as both trite and bucolic. Unlike Kincade, Evie Smoak-Fox never idealized her subject matter, instead finding beauty inside of imperfection.

Also, like Vermeer who she often credited as her greatest influence, she was mostly known for portraiture, her final paintings all being kept in the hands of private collectors and family members. ‘My Happiness’, a portrait of her daughter with Lucius Fox, was expected to bring in between $250k to $750k at auction despite the fact that, especially in recent years, her work has been highly sought out. Instead, it stunned many in the art world by bringing in a four million dollar high bid from Bruce Wayne who then donated the piece to his own Wayne Foundation’s private gallery.

“Wait…” he frowned and looked back at both the picture and Fox’s bio.

Nope, two kids; Tamara and Lucius Fox Jr from his first marriage to Tanya Fox but no mention anywhere of a third child with his second wife, Evelyn.

He grumbled in irritation and focused his attention back to the conversation going on above him.

//Glad to see that you were paying attention. To that, at least. What about what we were discussing at the meeting?//

//Honestly, it was all in one ear and out the other.//

“I know how you feel,” Clark muttered her his breath.

//I thought so. Basically even the executives at Wayne Publishing are pushing for us to sell to Edge. He might be a smug bastard but he’s got deep pockets and his focus is actually on media whereas Wayne Enterprises is known more for our tech. The only reason we bought the Planet was for the prestige and having it under our banner doesn’t really serve that purpose anymore; especially with this Miller thing hanging over our heads. It’s barely breaking even and, win or lose, this thing is going to cost us big time. We already have advertisers pulling their ads because they want to distance themselves from the scandal.//

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. If Morgan Edge got his claws into The Daily Planet then he could forget about writing the kinds of stories that mattered. From then on he’d be stuck writing slanted attacks in the form of ‘real news’ or puff pieces. If he wanted to be stuck working for a paper like The Globe he would have gotten a job there to begin with.

//Fine; tell them I’ll take it under consideration and put together some numbers for me to look at.//

//You’re sure?//

//You said it yourself; it’s business, not personal. I don’t like the idea of selling to Edge but if the numbers are right, I’ll let it go.//

Clark felt a tinge of guilt for continuing to listen in at this point. He originally started listening in order to find out what the lawyers were saying about Lois, then stayed because they started talking about this ‘Baby’ person and the fact that she was being threatened. Now that they were talking business it just felt like he was crossing a line.
He stopped listening, got up, and knocked on the door to Perry’s office. It was just a courtesy however. Perry rarely shut it, preferring instead to be available to his reporters at all times without any walls between them.

“Come in,” he said, waving him inside as he chewed on his unlit cigar while working at his own computer. “What do ya need, Kent?”

“I thought you quit,” he said with a frown as he gestured toward the cigar.

“It’s not lit, is it?” He tossed back but took the cigar out of his mouth anyway. “Now what do you want; I’m kind of busy putting out a paper here.”

“I just have a question about Lucius Fox. You guys go way back, right?”

He offered him a disgruntled look, “I’m going to tell you, just like I told the other three people who came in here before you; no, I do not have the inside track on what’s going to happen to the paper and no, I will not talk to ‘my buddy’ about keeping you on in case of layoffs. We’re all in the same sinking ship, Kent; me more than anybody else here.”

“That’s not what I was going to ask,” he said, moving further into the room. “I was doing some research on Lucius Fox—”

“Why?” He asked flatly.

“Why?”

“Yes Kent, ‘why’? Why would you be doing research on Lucius Fox when you’re supposed to be covering the Superman beat while Lois is on medical leave? Last I heard Lucius Fox wasn’t Superman,” he returned sarcastically.

“He could be; the only pictures we’ve got of the guy are pretty fuzzy,” he joked.

“You’re hilarious, Kent. You should go into comedy after I fire you for wasting my time.”

He cleared his throat and adjusted his stance slightly, “I was looking into the Miller thing again and was doing some background research on Wayne Enterprises when I noticed a discrepancy.”

Perry gave him a hard look, “Again; what does Miller have to do with Superman?”

“Nothing, but Superman isn’t doing anything right now so I figured I’d work on this instead,” he said quickly.

“And how do you know Superman’s not doing anything? For all you know he could be out there rescuing a kitten out of a tree or picking up his blue and red longjohns from the dry cleaners. Read the sign, Kent!” He said, pointing to the wooden placard fixed on the wall above his desk, “There is no such thing as—”

“As a slow news day,” he finished for him. “Yeah, I know, Chief; but—”

“And don’t call me Chief!” He grumbled.

“Jimmy and Lois call you ‘Chief’,” he pointed out.

“That’s because he’s an idiot and she’s a Pulitzer Prize winning pain in my ass,” he muttered, sticking his cigar back in his mouth and reaching for his lighter.
“No smoking in the building, Ch—er, Mr. White,” he reminded him.

“Goddamn it,” he said shoving the lighter back in his pocket and snatching the cigar out of his mouth. “Fine! What’s this ‘discrepancy’ that has your panties in a twist? The faster I can get you out of my office, the better.”

“I was researching Fox and noticed that he has a daughter from his second marriage but I can’t seem to find anything on her, even in our own archives.”

“For good reason,” he said in an almost cold tone, his steely eyes flashing as his playful grouchiness gave way to genuine ire. “I might have expected someone like Carroll to go after a man by using his kids as a way in through the backdoor but I expected better out of you. You know how I feel about that kind of thing, Kent; if you can’t get the news the right way then you don’t need to be working here.”

“No,” he said quickly, “it’s not like that at all.”

“Then what is it like?” He demanded.

He motioned toward the door then waited for the older man’s nod before shutting it and walking closer to his desk, “I got some information that whoever targeted Lois might be targeting others as well.”

“Officially the doctors are saying that Lois had a mild stroke,” he reminded him.

“Lois was healthy as a horse; there’s no way this was a stroke. She was poisoned somehow,” he said emphatically.

“Facts not speculation, Kent,” he told him gruffly. “Who the hell knows what we’ll be next week but today we’re still journalists.”

“Okay, well here’s a fact: strokes don’t hack servers,” he said wryly.

The older man eyed him irritably, “Fine; you get a doctor to go on record saying she was poisoned and I’ll run it on the front page above the fold, now what does that have to do with Lucius Fox and his kid?”

He hesitated for a moment before clearing his throat and diving right in, “I have reason to believe that whoever caused Lois’s collapse is also threatening Bruce Wayne and Lucius Fox. Specifically they’re targeting Wayne’s fiancée who also happens to be Lucius Fox’s daughter.”

Perry looked at him blankly for a moment before leaning on his desk and tenting his fingers together, “Come again?”

“I have reason to believe--”

The other man held up a hand, stopping him in his verbal tracks.

“Oh, where exactly did you come by this information?” He asked him in a deceptively level tone. “Because, last I heard, Wayne wasn’t engaged to anyone.”

Clark shifted his weight nervously, “I, um, sort of overheard them talking about it.”

“You sort of overheard them talking about it?” He pursed his lips, “And where did you ‘sort of’ overhear this?”
He blinked, he didn’t think of that part. “Men’s room,” he said slowly.

He nodded once, “So, just to clarify, Bruce Wayne, a man who owns one of the top security firms in the world, and Lucius Fox, the most intelligent man I have ever met, were, what?” He smiled toothily, “Shooting the breeze around the urinal while you were just standing there listening in?” He cleared his throat and leaned forward a little further, “‘Do you want to know why I don’t believe you, Kent?’ He asked in a confidential tone. “Three reasons and, no, not for the reasons I’ve already mentioned because smart people do stupid things all the time and rich guys who think they’re indestructible make even dumber mistakes. No, I don’t believe you because A) The meeting just broke up not more than ten minutes ago and you haven’t moved from your desk in the last hour and a half. I know this because not five minutes before you walked into my office, Sam Weitzman called me to tell me the meeting broke for lunch and asked if I could come up later to answer some questions related to Lois’s investigation. B) Because you said you heard this in the men’s room and, I don’t know what men do at the urinal where you’re from, but here in Metropolis men don’t engage in heartfelt conversations while taking a leak. And C) You can’t lie for shit.”

He cleared his throat, “Anonymous source?”

“Get out of my office, Kent,” he said gruffly.

“I’m telling you that someone overheard them talking about the fact that Lucius’s daughter was being threatened by someone attached to the Miller thing.”

He sighed, “Why would anybody connected to Miller be threatening Tam?”

“Not that daughter, someone called ‘Baby’.”

Perry sat up and looked at him, his brow furrowed in concern as he dropped all pretense of sarcasm, “Wait, they said someone was going after Baby?”

“Yes, but I can’t find anything on anyone named ‘Baby’ except a brief blurb on an art website that mentions Lucius and his second wife had a daughter together.”

He didn’t say anything for a long moment before motioning for Clark to have a seat.

He took a moment to examine the normally caustic but composed older man. His jaw was clenched and his eyes darted towards his phone as though he were thinking of calling someone. Instead, he picked up his unlit cigar again and rolled it in his fingers nervously before speaking, “Let’s say I let you run with this story, Kent; what would be your endgame?”

He frowned, “What do you mean? Getting to the truth, of course.”

“And what truth is that?”

“The…” He looked at him blankly.

“Look, the paper is done,” he said flatly. “Between you and me it’s just a matter of time before Wayne sells us out to Edge; it’s just business. Edge can do more for this paper than Wayne can and if he’s willing to take the financial hit then I don’t really give a damn who buys us.”

“Morgan Edge will destroy the integrity of this paper,” he scowled.

“Integrity,” he snorted. “I like you Kent; you’re old school like me. When I hired you from the Daily Star, George Taylor told me you were his best and his brightest.” He leaned back in his chair, “I’ve known George for twenty-five years; long enough to know that the reporters he sends to me don’t
come empty-handed. He always makes sure to teach them what’s important before sending them up to the big leagues. Tell me, Kent; what did George teach you?”

“Mr. Taylor taught me a lot of things,” he said, feeling oddly like he was being put on the spot for some sort of trespass he wasn’t even aware he’d made.

Other than, you know, eavesdropping on a private conversation.

“I’m sure he did,” the older man said as he popped the unlit cigar in his mouth and ran his thumbs under his suspenders, “but what’s his Golden Rule, do you remember?”

He let out a frustrated breath suddenly feeling like a five year old who was about to be put in the corner, “It’s always about the people.”

“That’s right,” the other man said, cocking his finger like a gun and aiming it in his direction, “It’s always about the people, always about making the human connection.”

“What does this have to do with Miller and Lois?”

“What do Miller and Lois have to do with Baby?” He returned. His brows drew together in consternation, “I don’t know yet, that’s why I need to investigate it further.”

“So, what? You think if you write an article about Wayne hooking up with Lucius Fox’s youngest daughter that will fix everything? Or maybe you can strong arm Wayne into not selling out to Edge by threatening to write an article exposing an innocent girl to intense media scrutiny?”

“No, of course not,” he said, taken aback. “You know I would never do something like that, or at least I hope you do.”

“Then what’s your angle?” He asked him in return. “Where’s the beef, Kent?”

‘Where’s the beef?’” He repeated wryly.

“Yeah, ‘Where’s the beef?’ as in ‘Where’s the meat on the bone?’” He rejoined, “You were alive in the eighties, right? You should know this, Kent. I realize you’re a real newsman but they invented this thing called ‘television’ a while back; try watching it sometime.”

“I was born in 1983,” I think, he added silently. For all he knew he was born ten thousand years ago. Time wasn’t really all that relative when you’re a newborn in a pod hurtling through space several times faster than the speed of light. “I wasn’t really watching a whole lot of television at the time.”

“Yeah well, that commercial came out in ’84 so that’s no excuse.”

Perry’s sense of humor was not only caustic at times, but highly inconvenient.

“If she’s being threatened by the same people who went after Lois then that’s news any way you cut it.” He looked at his Editor-in-Chief with a hint of suspicion, “You know, if I didn’t know any better I might think that you want me to drop this because of your friendship with Lucius Fox.”

Perry stilled for a moment before breaking into a slightly forced grin, “And if I were a few years younger and not as laidback and magnanimous, I’d be tempted to knock you on your ass for that, Kent.” He gave him a hard look, “But I won’t because you might actually be onto something.”

“I am?” He asked in surprise.
He nodded slightly. “I’ve known Lucius Fox a very long time and I knew Baby, too,” he said as he relaxed into his chair once more. “He never brought her here but, every once in a while when I’d go to Gotham, I’d see her in his office.” He looked out of his window towards the skyline, “She was just this tiny little thing, quiet.” He paused as if remembering her. “She never left his side, never cried, never fussed; she would just sit in the corner and color or read a book.” He looked up at him, “I was one of the few members of the press Lucius trusted to even be in the same room with her because he knew my policy on kids. If I ever thought Lucius was dirty, friend or no friend, I’d nail his hide to the wall but I’d never allow one word to be written about his kids. Used to be that most journalists respected that kind of thing, but nowadays you have the paparazzi and the supposed ‘mainstream journalists’ camped out in day care center parking lots and parks just hoping to snap photos of celebrities with their children, even going so far as to scream out stuff just to get a reaction from them because crying babies sell more papers. Lucius never wanted that for any of his kids, but especially not for her.”

Despite himself, the look on the older man’s face held him spellbound, “Why not? I mean, I get it, but why?”

“She was the last piece of Evie he had left,” he said simply. He leaned forward in his chair, “I’d never actually spoken to Baby, never even heard her voice until she was almost five even though I’d seen her on and off since she was in diapers.” He took the cigar back out of his mouth and twirled it between his fingers again as though lost in his memories, “Truth be told, I assumed she couldn’t speak and just never asked. It wasn’t just that she was quiet, it was that she was so…” he frowned, “invisible.”

“Invisible?” He repeated with a slight frown.

He shrugged, “She was…I don’t know. It’s like I knew she was there but I’d forget about her until Lucius would turn to talk to her or call her over. It was a bit disconcerting really seeing a kid that little so composed and quiet. My wife, Alice, had a younger brother who was autistic and I just assumed she was as well since she always seemed so lost and content in her own little world. The first time I heard her speak, Evie had been dead almost a year. We lost our boy, Jerry, around the same time so I couldn’t come to the funeral. Alice was a wreck that entire year so, when I went up to Gotham, Lucius suggested I bring her along and even arranged for us to fly first class.”

A sadness crept over his face then, “Truth was, that trip was a last ditch effort on my part to save our marriage. Part of Alice blamed me for Jerry’s death. He was always a troubled kid, ran the streets, got into trouble; we fought like cats and dogs from the time he was fourteen years old and I found pot in his sock drawer. She said I was too tough on him and that the only reason he got himself shot by some punk is because I threw him out of the house the week before that. He was messing around with some girl and her drug dealing boyfriend went after him. I knew she didn’t mean it and she apologized later, but…” he sighed. “Anyway, we’re at Wayne Enterprises and Lucius meets us in the lobby with Baby. His ex-wife was there to pick her up and take her someplace but the second she saw Alice, she pulled away from them, ripped this page out of her coloring book, and handed it to her. She said, ‘It’s a picture of a flower so you won’t be sad anymore.’ I don’t even know how she knew.” He smiled, “Lucius said later that he never told Baby about Jerry and, if you didn’t know her, Alice looked perfectly normal but Baby knew. Alice reached out for her and I thought for sure she was going to burst into tears or Baby was going to have a screaming fit because I still assumed she was autistic and being around my brother-in-law taught me that unexpected touching was a bad idea, but they were both fine. She just knelt down, accepted the picture, and said thank you before hugging her.” He shook his head slightly, “I don’t know the how of it or why, but that was the day the light came back into her eyes. When Keith came into our lives a few years ago, Baby was part of the reason why she wanted us to adopt him even though we were probably too damn old to be starting over. She even said, ‘If Lucius could do it, why can’t we do it at our age as well?’”
Perry turned and gave him a hard look, “I’m not going to tell you not to pursue this; I’m not even going to warn Lucius that you’re looking into his daughter to get to where you think this is going. What I will tell you is that George was right; people come first, Kent. Don’t hurt an innocent girl just to get justice for this paper or for Lois. Baby didn’t poison her and she doesn’t own this paper; she’s not the one selling us out either, Wayne is. If what you ‘heard in the men’s room’ is true, she’s just another victim of this thing so if and when you do go after her, make damn sure you’re doing it for the right reasons.”

“I understand what you’re saying but the truth has to come out,” Clark told him even though he felt more than a little uncomfortable saying it. “While I get that she’s probably a nice girl, people are getting hurt by this and so is she. If she’s being targeted then I need to know why and how she’s connected to Miller. Something tells me that she’s not just being singled out because of Wayne or her father.” He firmed his jaw, “I’m pursuing this even if it means ruffling a few feathers along the way or having to take it to another paper.”

The other man looked heavenward as if seeking strength from a higher power, “You know, sometimes I think—no, I know Lois has been a bad influence on you,” he said getting up from his desk and walking over to the window to crack it open then took out his lighter and lit his cigar. He puffed on it a few times and fixed Clark with a stern gaze, “Before you open your pie-hole, it’s my office and I can smoke if I damn well want to. Secondly, your problem Kent, is that you lack…” he grimaced.

“Lack what?” He asked, rising to his feet warily.

He took his cigar from his mouth and pointed towards the bullpen, “I’ve known you for a few years now and I like you, I do. You’re the last of a dying breed; you’re ethical, driven, you’ve got a good head on your shoulders, and you’re affable if not a little too self-effacing at times. You’re even a pretty good looking kid even though you need to run a comb through your hair and buy some clothes that actually fit.” He gave his rumpled khakis and uneven tie a disgruntled look. “You might even find a girl someday if you’d wear something that didn’t look like it’d been slept in, but you lack that spark that connects the rest of us together.” His gaze softened at Clark’s obvious discomfiture, “I see those other guys going out for beers after work, inviting you along, but you never go. I’ve seen all the looks you give Lois, seen her treat you like a dog in the manger in response, and yet you never asked her out or called her on her crap; you just let a guy like Jonathan Carroll roll on in without saying ‘boo’ and you let Lois bully you into doing her grunt work. Basically Kent, you’re a loner and our job as journalists is to understand the people we’re reporting on. Our job is to record and report on the world around us and how it connects to our reader’s lives; how do you expect to become a great reporter if you let life just pass you by?” He gave him an almost pitying look, “Look, you do what you want to do, son. Report the facts, get the story; it’s what Lois would do. Hell, it’s what Carroll would do, but if you keep missing the human connection then all you’re doing is typing, not writing.”

For a moment there it wasn’t Perry White standing before him but Jonathan Kent, his father. Just the look in the older man’s eyes as he dressed him down had him feeling as though he’d shrunk from 6’3” to less than two inches tall.

He dropped his eyes to the floor, “I promise I won’t mention her in the article unless I absolutely have to and I’ll do my best to keep my distance.” He looked up at him steadily, “But if something comes up proving she’s involved somehow then I won’t protect her or Wayne. If Wayne’s dirty or if any one of them are colluding with whoever attacked Lois, then I won’t pull my punches.”

“Do what you gotta do, Kent,” the older man said with a nod. “But while you’re working on this I expect you to still be covering the Superman beat. I want something from you by the end of the day
even if it’s a report on how primary colors are making a fashion comeback. Now do me a favor and get the hell out of my office.”

“Thanks Chief,” he said as he turned to leave.

“And don’t call me Chief!”

“Come on,” Felicity said, patting the bed beside her and lifting the covers to crawl under the sheets after the dog jumped up to lay beside her. He began to nose at the covers so she lifted them. He crawled underneath then plopped his head on the pillow after turning himself around a couple of times. She tucked the covers over him, her smile broadening as Ace let out a satisfied groan and rolled onto his back, his front paws pointed to the ceiling as he scooted slightly and offered her a grin with his tongue lolling out of his mouth. “You’re just a goofball, you know that?”

His paw twitched and she rubbed his chest causing him to let out another contented noise. “I have news for you, when Bruce gets back your days of sleeping on his side of the bed are over, my friend.”

Ace merely pawed the air again as if telling her not to stop and gave her a look that screamed, ‘Not a chance, this is my bed now.’

She looked over at the clock. It was a little bit after five but she and Laurel had decided to try to catch whatever sleep they could if they were going to keep on their toes during the mission. Wildcat left after their late lunch and she had Tam and Zander kick all the workmen out at 4:30 so they could get ready for bed. Renee left around the same time as Wildcat but, much to her surprise, returned a bit later with a large suitcase. She told her that Dick called to let her know that Bruce wanted her to stick close and stay with them in the penthouse just in case. While she appreciated both the other woman’s honesty and company, part of her felt a flush of something akin to embarrassment about the fact that both Dick and Bruce no longer trusted her to be alone in what was supposedly her own apartment.

She understood why, of course, but still; she’d been dealing with these night terrors for almost six months now on her own without them. Admittedly, she wasn’t dealing with them particularly well, but she’d managed. As much as she liked Renee, it almost felt like Bruce had asked her to stay because he felt like she needed a babysitter.

As soon as the thought came into her mind, her cell began to vibrate on the nightstand. She glanced at the display then picked up, “Hi, I was just thinking about you.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about you all day so that makes us even,” Bruce told her.

It was really hard not to melt a little when he said stuff like that even when she was a little ticked off. “Where are you?”

“The hotel. Your dad and I came back to get some sleep before I head out to confront Mallory later.”

“Dad?” She asked with a frown, “He’s helping you with this? When did this happen and what exactly will he be doing?”

Bruce let out a disgruntled noise, “He’s going to handle coms for me. I told him about the op and about the threat against you and he insisted on being a part of it. He said, and I quote, he ‘was going to be on me like ‘white on rice’ from here on out’, end quote.”
She felt another fission of anger crawl up her spine, “You told my dad about what was going on?”

“Hey, you suggested I find some backup while I was in Metropolis and Lois didn’t have Superman’s phone number.”

“Funny,” she said in a tone that was anything but amused.

He sighed, “The simple fact of the matter is that I’ve been distracted and all over the place since we spoke this morning and your dad confronted me after the meeting broke off. He wouldn’t drop it so I told him the bare minimum; that the reason I went to Starling was because there had been a threat on your life eighteen months ago and that I had reason to believe that whoever was behind the thing with Lois Lane might be targeting you as well. I didn’t mention Orbital or anything about Slade, I promise. I did, however, tell him about Queen’s operation because whoever this is, they’re going after both of us and you’re the common denominator along with Isabel Rochev.”

She struggled to keep her cool, “We just had this long discussion about you going behind my back and talking to my dad--!”

“I know,” he said apologetically. “However, this isn’t me trying to get my way; this is about the case and if we’re being targeted then they could come after any of us, including your dad. He needed to know what was going on so that he doesn’t accidently raise any red flags because if you’re being watched then they’re probably watching him as well.”

“I…I guess you might have a point,” she admitted reluctantly.

“I also let him know that we were waiting at least six months like he suggested and not to go to Danny or anyone else about it until we were ready. After we got back to the hotel I went into more detail with him on what we were doing—again, I didn’t disclose anything significantly more than what I already told him nor did I go into any particulars about what it was you did for Queen. I did request that he not tell Peggy Ann or Tanya about the engagement if he hadn’t done so already. Once I explained everything, he even gave us the go ahead to move in together at the manor *if you wanted to,*” he emphasized, “I didn’t suggest that or bring it up; he did. He said he understood and that it might even be a good idea, if for no other reason than to keep you safe, but I told him that, for now, it would be best to keep our distance publicly until I knew what was going on. Until then I assured him that you were capable of protecting yourself and that my team would be keeping close watch.”

She felt herself soften at that, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, but we’re still moving in together when all this is over,” he said dryly. “And I’m still planning on sharing your bed every night even if I have to sneak in through the entrance to the Batcave.”

She smiled, “Sweet talker.”

“I’d love to do more than just talk right about now.”

She flushed at the intimacy of his tone, “Well, your side of the bed already has an occupant so…”

“Yeah, well, the dog will just have to deal with it when I come home, won’t he?”

“How do you know I’m talking about the dog?” She teased then immediately wished she could take it back the second her mind caught up with her mouth.

Like he needed to be reminded of the fact that she almost cheated on him with Oliver that morning.
She was just about to offer him a hasty apology but he never missed a beat, “I know because you and I belong together, remember?”

“I remember,” she said quietly. She still had to ask something though, “Bruce, um, why did you tell Dick to ask Renee to stay here at the penthouse?”

“I didn’t do it because I think you aren’t capable of taking care of yourself or that you can’t be trusted,” he said, correctly anticipating what she was getting at. “I trust you, I do, but I don’t trust Laurel yet and I…” she hear him blow out a harsh breath, “Okay, I’ll admit that when I talked to Dick before I talked to you that I was concerned about…” He seemed to take a moment to come up with the right words, “I’m not saying this right,” he grumbled. “You somehow have a way of turning me into a babbling idiot.”

“Just tell me the truth, even if you think it will hurt my feelings,” she told him.

“When he called me I thought you might need someone there but not because I don’t trust you. I’m still worried about you now but not because I think you’re a danger to yourself or others; it’s just that you said you didn’t want to give up the guns because you didn’t feel safe. Renee is a trained operator, she’s got nerves of steel, and she was a cop. If you do have another violent reaction then she’s less likely to accidently hurt you than Dick would be. I trained Dick to take down a threat and not be nice about it; she, on the other hand, although just as effective, is trained to restrain someone without seriously hurting them.”

“That’s still not trust,” she pointed out.

“I know it doesn’t sound like it but it’s not for my peace of mind as much as it’s for yours,” he said gently. “I know you said you were worried about hurting someone so I wanted someone there who could protect themselves and you at the same time. I couldn’t be as sure of Laurel’s reactions if you did have another night terror, but Renee I would trust with my life. More importantly, I trust her with yours. I thought that having her there would help you sleep more soundly, especially if you didn’t have to worry about Laurel or anyone else accidently walking in on you like Dick did.”

Damn it, he was right.

Fuck.

“It’s really hard stay mad at you when you say crap like that,” Felicity told him irritably.

“That was kind of the point,” he said with a hint of amusement.

“You didn’t tell her…?” She asked quietly.

“No, and I told Dick not to say anything when I called him back,” he promised. “The only thing Dick told her was that, if you did have a night terror, to keep her distance and make sure Laurel didn’t try to approach you. Being a trained operator herself, she understood. Actually, truth be told, in a sense she’s there more for Laurel’s benefit than she is for yours if that makes you feel better.”

“A little,” she admitted. “By the way, you do realize that you just called me a trained operator, right?”

“Well, I can’t exactly call you a civilian and expect her to buy that, can I?” He said wryly. “Besides, according to Dick, the three of you and Wildcat have pretty much formed your own team. Should I be worried that you’re taking over the Bat’s territory in my absence?”

“I can’t help it if I’m better at recruitment than you are,” she returned.
“So are we good?”

“We’re good,” she said after a moment’s consideration. “I get it. Besides, I already got my revenge this morning.”

“What did you do?” He asked warily.

“I bought a grill for the garden.”

“A grill?” He asked in surprise. “How is buying a grill revenge?”

“It was a sixteen thousand dollar grill.”

Silence.

“Why did you buy a sixteen thousand dollar grill?” He asked at last.

“Wildcat picked it out; he wanted to make us steaks for lunch.”

“Figures,” he grumbled and she could practically hear him rubbing his temples. “I don’t care if you buy a million dollar grill, just don’t buy it for Wildcat. If he wants a steak he can order it from Carousel.”

She pursed her lips, “Well, technically the grill *was* for me and you can use it too so…”

“Why would I use a grill?” He asked dryly. “You already know I can’t cook.”

“Grilling isn’t cooking. It’s tossing meat over fire and, according to the reaction Wildcat and the workman had to that thing, it’s hardwired into your DNA.”

“Fine, I’ll run right out and buy a ‘Kiss the Cook’ apron when I get home,” he said sarcastically.

“Already got you one,” she told him. “And Wildcat got one that says, ‘My Meat is Well Seasoned, Ready to be Rubbed by the Right Woman, and Always Served Hot’.”

“I really don’t like Wildcat,” Bruce said at last. “The only reason I still go by his gym for training occasionally is so I have an excuse to lay him on his ass.”

“Aw, you have a best friend besides Alfred,” she teased. “That’s so cute; it’s almost as though you’re becoming a social butterfly.”

“You are so not funny,” he told her flatly. “Baby…” He paused, “I realize this is a bit off-topic and I’m not trying to upset you but I need to ask you something.”

“What is it?” She asked.

His tone was somber, almost hesitant, “When we talked this morning you said Slade didn’t hurt you; were you telling me the truth?”

“He didn’t rape me or anything,” she said, her face growing hot, but not with embarrassment.

“But it was…” he seemed to struggle for a moment, “assault.”

“Not, um…” she closed her eyes, “He touched me, my, um, breast,” she choked out in a near whisper, “through my clothes and kissed me.” She took a breath, “He wasn’t violent though and it was just for a second…”
“It’s still assault,” he told her, his voice hard with anger that was obviously not directed towards her. “Your friend Laurel will tell you that anytime someone touches you without your consent, it’s assault. He assaulted you, he touched you against your will in a sexual manner. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know that,” she said, wrinkling her brow as she drew her knees protectively towards her chest.

“I know you know, but I’ve been thinking about this all day and...” she heard the rustle of covers against the receiver, “When I would have violent episodes like the one you had last night it was usually because I blamed myself for something; that some innocent was killed due to the fact that I couldn’t get there fast enough or that someone got away from me. It was like they were a punishment, like my subconscious needed to remind me of my failures. I’m not saying that it’s the same for you but, just in case, I wanted to tell you that none of it was your fault. You did nothing wrong.”

“I killed people,” she said in a voice that was barely a whisper, hot tears stinging the corners of her eyes. “I killed a lot of people. I don’t even know how many, but at least two besides Slade. It could have been six, or sixteen; I know I emptied my gun but I lost count of the number of bullets.” She began to shake as she waited for his reaction, “Do you still...?” She choked up.

“I will always love you,” he said fiercely. “Don’t ever doubt that.”

“But--”

“No buts! It was not your fault,” he said adamantly. “You saved lives; your life, Lance’s life, and the lives of your team. You had no other choice.”

“You don’t kill,” she said swallowing. “You...I’m a killer now.”

“No,” he told her. “You’re a survivor.” He paused, “If anyone is to blame for anything, it’s me.”

“You weren’t there,” she objected.

“Exactly,” he told her. “I should have been there; I shouldn’t have let you go in the first place. I should’ve made sure that when you did go that you knew I would still be there when you needed me to be but because I was too busy being a selfish prick, you had to face that alone. That makes it my fault, not yours.”

“I knew you would have come if you could. Besides, I’m kind of used to being alone,” she joked feebly through her sniffles.

“You were never alone, Baby,” he told her. “Not even for a second. I may not have been there physically but there was never a day that went by that I didn’t think about you. For the last four years you were the first thing I thought about when I woke up and the last thing I thought about when I closed my eyes. Even when I was with someone else, I never stopped thinking about you. I didn’t forget you; I’ve never forgotten you. I can’t forget you and I never will.”

She sniffled once more, the tears now running freely down her cheeks, “You know what really sucks right now? That you waited until you were in *Metropolis* before you decided to get all romantic on me. Goddamn it, you so owe me a night of wining and dining after this, I swear to God.”

He chuckled, “I promise I will romance the pants off you first chance I get; hopefully I’ll manage to do it multiple times, in fact.”

“Just don’t go investing in any little blue pills beforehand, a girl’s gotta sleep sometime,” she quipped
shakily as she reached for a tissue.

“Oh, when I get home you’re going to be missing a lot of sleep, Mrs. Wayne. Medication not required.”

She felt her stomach fill with butterflies at his deep, sexy rumble, “I’m not Mrs. Wayne yet,” she reminded him.

“You’ve been Mrs. Wayne from the moment I fell in love with you; it just took me a while to realize it.”

“Again with the long-distance romance; you’re killing me here,” she complained half-heartedly.

“Well, we could always have phone sex…?” He offered.

“Not with the dog watching,” she said, glancing over at a now snoring Ace beside her. “That would just be…wrong and I’d never be able to look him in the eye ever again.”

“Okay, when I get home that dog is leaving the bedroom because I’ll be damned if I let him interfere with me making love to you.” He paused again, “I should let you get some sleep, but if you need me for anything you call me, okay?”

“I will, I promise.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she returned. “Be safe and come home to me in one piece, okay?”

“Always. Goodnight, Baby. And you be safe, too,” he added. “I won’t ask you not to go into Orbital but that doesn’t mean I won’t be on pins and needles until I know you’re safe. Call or text me when you come home so I know you’re okay. Queen, Renee, and Dick are going to be on surveillance while Luke runs patrols, and Wildcat is supposed to be sticking close to you when you go inside. Hopefully I’ll be home before morning but, just in case, if I don’t hear anything by sun up I’m sending in the troops even if it means blowing the mission, understood? You come first. Always.”

“I will, I promise. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Bruce ended the call and laid back against the pillows, his mind too engaged with the mission to sleep. The phone call to Felicity helped but he was still frustrated by the fact that he had to spend another night away from her, especially since he knew she was going into Orbital without him being there. Even with his entire team and part of Queen’s watching her, the entire thing put him on edge. Still, he felt a bit of the tightness he’d been carrying inside his chest ease up and vowed to end this as quickly as possible so he could get home.

Another thing it did was make him more determined than ever to get to the bottom of this thing. The sooner he ended this, the sooner he could get Orbital out of their lives so they could move forward once and for all. They were nearing the finish line, he could feel it. Now all he had to do was get the answers he was looking for.

Chapter End Notes
I know it took an extra couple of days so I'm going to stop apologizing and just say genius takes time. (grin). Seriously though, I hate bridge chapters but I had to do a little sewing before our friends came face to face. And how snoopy was Clark, huh? That's actually canon in the New 52; Clark is known for his misuse of the superhearing and x-ray vision, not in a creepy way, but in a 'I'll just take a quick peek at who she's texting' kind of way.

Speaking of the New 52, many people have asked me what these characters look like and who they're based on and I always say the comics because that's what they look like to me; real life versions of the comics. However, a lot of people can't see that so my good friend Eilowyn started suggesting actors she liked who could be these characters. I don't actually watch a lot of television (believe it or not) so a lot of these actors I'd never heard of before. However, I've gone back through the entire story and added new pictures at the beginning of every chapter illustrating the characters we both agreed would work. It's not an exact match since I still described the comic characters and not the actors but, if this was a movie, it's who I'd cast in it. Please consider going back through all the chapters just to see the pictures and let me know if you agree or disagree and who you'd have picked instead. I love hearing from you guys because you always make me see things in a way I never have before.

Also, quick shout out to Geeky Monkey who inspired the Cafe Cubano bit. See? I really do love my peeps.

The cast is as follows (not including the Arrow folks because you guys already know what they look like):

Bruce is Richard Armitage. Originally I picked Michael Fassbender even though he has black hair and a stronger build and the actor is more ginger. I could see how he'd work though as they have very similar features otherwise but I think Armitage is a better pick. Let me know if you disagree.

Alfred is Sean Pertwee who plays him on Gotham (which I recorded but haven't watched yet). Again, not who I immediately would have thought of but based on what I have seen him in I get it.

Ian Somerhalder is Dick. I'd never even heard of this guy before (no, I was not aware of a phenomena called The Vampire Diaries even though it's on the same network as Arrow). Eilowyn picked him and, I must admit, he's much better than Donny Osmond which is who he looked like throughout the 70's and 80's.

Victoria Cartegena is Renee, again she plays her on Gotham but is perfect.

Nic Bishop is Col Trevor because, hot damn, he *is* who I see in my mind's eye whenever possible.

Michael B Jordan is Luke; again, good choice by Eilowyn even though the comic Batwing has hazel eyes.

Tyler Posey is Tim. Another actor from a show I never saw but that I put on Netflix.

Tessa Thompson is Tam and boy can Eilowyn pick a winner.

Karen Gillian is Barbara who I never would have thought of in a million years but after
Eilowyn pointed her out I got it.

Wildcat is Josh Brolin...which is very weird for me to say but he fits the look of Wildcat and would be perfect for the role if you really, really thought about it. He can do gruff, flirty, and sarcastic all at the same time and I could definitely hear him call Felicity 'sweetheart'.

Hard to believe he's that old now. I had such a crush on him when Goonies first came out. Old age sucks.

Nancy Kwan is Peggy and I *did* picture her in the role from the very beginning. Admittedly her hair is not salt and pepper but that can be fixed with a trip to the salon.

Oona King, who you haven't seen yet, is Mama T aka Tanya Fox. She'll be in the story soon.

Lucius is not Morgan Freeman for me although he may be in Eilowyn's version. I always picked him as being more old world gentleman in his appearance so I chose a real life billionaire, Mo Ibrahim to play my Lucius Fox.

Lastly, Henry Cavill is Clark. Again, it's not perfect and seems lazy as a choice since he is the actor who portrays him, but the New 52 Clark does look a lot like him.

My uninspired Tumblr page has all of their pictures as well as all the different things that inspired me while writing this story. If you would like to look, you can. Fair warning though, you'll wind up being sucked into the jumble of my thought processes.

https://www.tumblr.com/blog/starlingmysteries

Thanks guys, and hope you had fun. Off to work on the next chapter. ---Jen
Chapter Fifty-Five

Chapter Notes

Sorry it took so long. In addition to this being the longest (and most important so far) chapter in this book, it also was a bear to post. For some reason AO3 was having formatting issues and I had to try for two hours to get it to work.

Anyway, normally I don't do this but I need to explain something about this chapter real quick to avoid confusion later. At one point in this story Miranda will have (one) of her big reveals. You may be tempted to accuse me of having a WTF Moment but, believe it or not, without getting into it here and spoiling it, all of it is based on actual canon stories within the DCU. The only thing I did was condense the timeline to fit in with the show. Other than that, it's all canon. Might not have happened in one single comic, but all of it did happen and, as weird as it's gonna sound, compared to the canon version, mine actually makes a bit more sense if I do say so myself. Also, yes, if it feels like a hidden pilot is being snuck in there, that's because it is. When (hopefully) I get to it, this chapter sets up the basis for book two. Pay attention, have fun, don't take anything at face value, and enjoy.

---Jen
Chapter Fifty-Five

Earlier that evening…

Superman landed lightly on the rooftop within a reasonable distance to the Daily Planet and retrieved his clothes from where shoved them into a duffle bag he liked to keep stuck down a commercial air vent for when he needed to make a quick change. With just a thought, the Kryptonian bio-tech armor that made up his suit began to **dissolve** until all that was left was the ‘S’ symbol on his chest which then glowed a soft blue, turned white, then transformed itself into what appeared to be a normal plain white undershirt.

His ‘suit’ had been with him from the beginning. His parents, Martha and Jonathan Kent, found it
wrapped around him like a blanket inside the pod that traveled the 27.1 light-years from his home planet of Krypton to the Kansas cornfield where they found him. Of course, it was, in actuality, much more than a simple blanket.

According to the educational matrix his biological father had left him, the world of his birth orbited the red sun ‘Rao’, known to Earth physicists as red dwarf LHS 2520 in the Corvus system. The sun itself gave off very little heat or light, it being a dim but ancient star nearly thirty trillion years older and less than 1/10th the size of Sol, so the Kryptonian people relied heavily on the planet’s superheated core and greenhouse gases to sustain life upon their world. As Krypton became more and more unstable, their scientists developed various biologically based technologies to try to counter the effects of the rapidly cooling planetary core. They built domes and artificial environments in which to grow food, manipulated their own DNA so that their people could better adapt to their environment and absorb the dying sun’s rays more efficiently, and wore the nanite based symbiotic ‘material’ that was cued to their specific DNA not only as a both a symbol of their rankings and houses but also as functional battle armor and survival gear.

Even though it was ancient tech, it was far more hardy than any Earth-based material. It was capable of withstanding just about any type of punishment, could act as a ‘pressure suit’ in the vacuum of space and maintain his oxygen levels, and, quite literally, it fit him like a second skin. In addition, it allowed him to both monitor his biological systems and repair wounds at a cellular level. He didn’t get hurt often, his near-invulnerability a side effect of the yellow sun and his own complex DNA that allowed him to become a living solar battery, but when he did get hurt it would begin healing any and all wounds almost instantly. Best of all, because the armor was linked to him, just a thought would activate it and morph it into whatever type of clothing he needed as long as it was formfitting. He couldn’t, for example, morph it into a jacket or coat as he had to maintain at least some skin on skin contact with the nanites in order for them to function correctly. He usually just chose to wear it as an undershirt or Henley, so when he did need to ‘change’ all he need do is remove his outer clothing and will it into being.

He wished he could get it to morph into regular clothes though, he thought as he shook out his khakis. They were even more rumpled than they had been before he was ‘called to duty’ in order to stop a bank robbery downtown and that was saying a lot. At least he now had a Superman story to turn in, he reasoned, even though it felt a bit skeevy to report on himself.

“I have seriously got to figure out a better system for this stuff,” he grumbled as he stepped into them then hastily threw on his blue plaid shirt, plain gray knit tie, and slightly threadbare olive green corduroy sportcoat. He stuck his round dark rimmed glasses on his face, shoved his fingers through his hair to bring it into some semblance of order, then reached for his equally rumpled trench coat, quickly slipping it on and straightening the lapels only to pull back in disgust as a pigeon chose that moment to gift him with a present.

“Aw, great,” he grimaced as he looked around for something to wipe it off with but standing as he was on a rooftop, there weren’t too many options. Seeing no other choice, he let it go and glared at the white streak of pigeon crap on his shoulder. “Too bad they don’t have telephone booths
anymore,” he muttered.

That would be convenient; just pop right in, change clothes, and pop out without having to deal with bird shit or bad weather. Then again, most telephone booths (when you could find one in the age of smart phones) were surrounded by glass so that wouldn’t exactly work out very well. He could, of course, put on the speed and change his clothes in a blur of movement, but the unfortunate consequence of that was sometimes in his haste his clothes would tear. He went through three brand new jackets and six shirts before he finally gave up on quick changes except in emergencies (of which there were still many). He made decent money at the paper but he could hardly afford to spend six hundred bucks a week on clothes. Luckily, Jimmy pointed him toward some very nice secondhand shops and a few Goodwill stores in the area so he could afford to expand his wardrobe on a budget.

He stretched his arms out in front of him and grimaced as the sleeves of both his trench and jacket receded and crawled up his arms.

Fit was a separate issue entirely.

Being tall and broad chested with wide shoulders, he often had to buy clothes that were a few sizes larger than what he would normally wear. Were he back home, his mother would have taken them in for him but he’d never gotten the hang of using a needle and thread. Another issue was sleeve length; they were always too short or too long but he tried to at least make sure they were still somewhat professional looking and, luckily, Perry wasn’t all that strict about enforcing the dress code. As long as he wore a button down shirt and tie, he could pair them with khakis or jeans as long as they looked halfway decent and weren’t ripped or patched all to hell and back. It was a good thing, too; it was hard enough finding regular clothes the correct length without having to worry about finding an off the rack suit that fit. On one hand, the college student shabbiness of his wardrobe helped him maintain his Clark Kent identity separate from Superman but, on the other hand, it would be nice not to have the boss you both respected and admired basically tell you that you look like a slob who needs to comb his hair every once in a while.

Plus, he wasn’t overly fond of being looked at like a broke and scruffy man-child living off ramen noodle soup when he was an adult with a well-paying career in his early thirties.

He was going to have to bite the bullet and carve out some time to buy a couple of nice suits then figure out how to keep them protected from the elements when he had to be Superman. Plus, he really needed to start maintaining a much more conservative and professional appearance especially if Edge took over the paper. He had a feeling that he was going to be looking for another job soon so he needed to look like the award winning journalist he was.

He walked to the edge of the building and checked the dark and narrow alley before hopping off the
side and landing lightly twenty-four stories down so that he could retrieve his bicycle from behind the dumpster. His ‘closet’ was on top of the old Empire Hotel which had closed years ago but was still considered a landmark. Luthor had been trying for years to get permission to knock it down but, for once, he didn’t get his own way. Even for Lex Luthor, tearing down a building that was such an iconic part of the Metropolis skyline was an impossible feat. His next bid was to try to buy the building from the city and revamp it as office space which, on the surface, didn’t make a lot of sense; it would cost more to renovate the building than it would just to build a new one, but he was determined.

The Empire Hotel, in addition to being a landmark, also separated Metropolis’s seedier side from the more affluent parts of the city. The Southside, better known to locals as Suicide Slum, was once an affluent neighborhood built up around the factories and steel mills of Hob’s Bay during the post-WWII revitalization that slowly fell into decay and ruin over time as those same factories shut their doors and moved overseas. Suicide Slum was now filled with dilapidated tenement buildings and housing projects, with very few economic opportunities for its residents other than selling guns or drugs. The Empire Hotel had been the last vestige of its former glory but now stood as a signpost to indicate that the purported ‘City of Tomorrow’ did, in fact, have a dark underbelly filled with gang violence, political corruption, and poverty.

Luthor grew up in Suicide Slum and claimed to want to revive the area by creating more jobs. People were listening to what he was saying so the general consensus was that he was finally going to get his way. He’d even gone so far as to buy or make offers on several structures surrounding the hotel including several low-income tenement buildings. At least half the owners had already sold out while the rest of them were waiting to see if his plan would raise property values thereby increasing the asking price. Of course, once he owned the building he still couldn’t alter the structure significantly, and it would cost him millions in asbestos removal alone, but he supposed it had something to do with the billionaire’s ego and his unwillingness to lose a fight.

After he bought the building, Clark would have to find another place to hide his duffle bag and bike but, for now, he was just sixteen blocks from The Daily Planet which was far enough away not to be spotted but close enough to be convenient for quick getaways and even quicker returns.

Within a few minutes he was securing his bike with a chain to Bibbowski’s Newsstand after waving hello to the owner’s brother who was reading a copy of Scientific American.

“Hey JoJo.”

“Hello young Mr. Kent!” The other man called out. “So what’s the latest news from The Daily Planet’s finest?”

“Ace reporter gets crapped on by pigeon,” he said ruefully.
“Makes for good compost though,” the older man said as he continued to flip through his magazine. “Also, there’s an article in here this month on how zoos are using animal waste as a renewable fuel source. Our pigeon population could someday be responsible for powering this entire city!”

“That may be, but it doesn’t do much for me right now except give Perry one more excuse to roll his eyes at me. Excuse me,” he said spotting the hotdog vendor who always hung around the entrance to The Daily Planet.

“Not at all, young Kent! Go slay your dragons while I continue to pursue my science,” JoJo said with a distracted wave of his hand.

He walked up and asked, “Hey, do you mind if I take some napkins?”

“Sure thing, pal,” the vendor told him. “After ya buy a dog you can have as many as you want.”

“Aw, come on,” he said, gesturing towards his lapel.

“Ain’t my problem, pal,” he tossed back in a strong Metropolis native accent. “I don’t do handouts here and them napkins cost money.”

“Fine, so much for the milk of human kindness,” he muttered, digging for his wallet. “Give me a couple of red hots and a bottle of water.” He didn’t have time to eat lunch what with the whole bank robbery thing and he had just enough time to scarf down a couple of hotdogs before he ran upstairs to file his story.

The guy took his cash and handed him back his change before dressing his dogs, “You want it dragged through the garden?” He asked, pronouncing it ‘GAH-den’ and ignoring the ‘r’.

“Yeah, with extra relish,” he told him.

The vendor fixed the dogs quickly and efficiently, being surprisingly generous with the toppings, before handing them and a small bottle of water over. “Napkin?”

The man behind the cart handed him a single white paper napkin.

“Seriously?” Clark said with a slight scowl. “I bought two dogs and an overpriced water and you’re only going to give me one?”

The guy rolled his eyes and handed him a small stack of the serviettes, “You know, you should go buy you a lottery ticket,” he said, gesturing toward the bird guano on his shoulder and lapel.

He frowned, “I thought the lottery thing was for dog crap not pigeon crap.”

“If you got flyin’ dogs taking a doof on your shoulder pal, you got problems that ain’t gonna get fixed by a couple of napkins,” the vendor cackled at his own lame joke.

“Funny, next time I’m getting my lunch from the pretzel guy across the street,” he said before shaking his head and sitting down on the steps of the building. He quickly shoveled one of the fully dressed red hots in his mouth and grimaced as a large glop of relish and some peppers rolled down his front. “Great,” he said before wetting a napkin with some water and cleaning off both the bird droppings and the relish. He was about to wet another to finish the job when he noticed Bruce Wayne exit the building along with Lucius Fox.

He snatched up his food and drink and hurried after him, “Mr. Wayne!” He called out, gesturing toward him with the hand holding the hotdog.

Wayne looked up, his eyes narrowing on him for a second before relaxing his stance and saying something to Lucius. The older man nodded and got into the cab which drove off as the other man approached him with a slightly wary look in his eyes.

“Mr. Wayne, my name is--”

“Clark Kent, I know. You were with Ms. Lane at the Miller hearing,” he finished for him as his lips curled in slight distaste and cleared his throat. He gestured vaguely toward his mouth but it took him a minute to understand why.

“Oh, thanks,” he said, fumbling with his other hotdog and his messenger bag, “Um, could you…?” He said awkwardly then handed him his hotdog.
Wayne took the paper wrapped red hot reluctantly and waited until Clark swung the strap across his chest and reached in his pocket for a napkin to wipe the relish off the corner of his mouth.

“You also have something…” he indicated his shoulder.

“Pigeon got me,” Clark nodded. “I'll get it later. But, ah, just in case you were wondering though, the other stuff was relish, I swear.”

The other man opened his mouth for a second but said nothing. He merely looked at him slightly askance, before handing him back his food and reaching in his own pocket for a handkerchief which he used to wipe off his hands, “So Mr. Kent, what can I help you with?” He asked, obviously not planning to explore the pigeon discussion further.

“Yes,” he cleared his throat and took a second to examine the man in front of him in return. “Are you okay?” He asked with a frown gesturing toward his own cheek to indicate the slight swelling and bruising on his face.

“Slipped on an icy sidewalk,” he said tersely. “Now, if you don’t mind…”

“Oh, uh, right, I’ll just…get to the point then.”

“Please do,” Wayne said dryly as he checked his watch with a flicker of his eyes.

“Mr. Wayne,” he said in a firm but respectful tone, “if you sell the paper to a man like Morgan Edge you’ll be tainting the legacy of The Daily Planet; a paper which stands for all of the things that make this country great. This paper has tackled the important issues of the day, even the unpopular ones, by exposing corruption, challenging prejudice, and covering the issues no one else would touch with a ten foot pole. It has always led the way when it comes to hard-hitting news and journalistic integrity. If you sell to Edge then everything this paper has stood for in the last one hundred sixty-nine years of its publication history will be undone.”

Wayne gave him an almost long-suffering look, “First off, Mr. Kent, I’m very aware of the history of this paper and no decisions have yet been made regarding the offers made by Galaxy Publications or anyone else for that matter—”
“I think we both know that’s not true, Mr. Wayne,” Clark said, cutting him off. “Did you ever stop to consider that maybe whoever set Lois up intended to paint a target on the Planet’s back in order to hurt your bottom line? That perhaps this is a personal attack on you and Wayne Enterprises as well as the paper?”

“That’s a bit far-fetched, don’t you think?” Clark admired the fact that the other man maintained his almost bored expression without missing a beat, but the slight narrowing of his eyes told him that, yes, he had. “The Daily Planet has been in steady decline for years and, if I do sell the paper, it will be a business decision, not a personal one. Also, while I do believe that Ms. Lane was the victim of something, I doubt anyone would be so Machiavellian as to attack her just to knock Wayne Enterprise stock down a couple of points.”

Depends on who it was doing the plotting, Clark thought to himself. “So do you deny that there is a greater conspiracy at play here?”

“A conspiracy?” He chuckled, “Look Mr. Kent, while I appreciate your fire and drive, I think perhaps you’re chasing ghosts.”

He felt a twinge of annoyance then, “So you deny that someone is targeting not only the paper and Lois, but also your fiancée?”

“My fiancée?” Again his almost amused smile didn’t waver but his eyes grew cold and flinty. “I think you’re a bit confused, I’m not engaged to anyone; officially or unofficially.”

“Funny, because my sources tell me that you’re engaged to your CEO’s youngest daughter from his second marriage, I believe she goes by the nickname ‘Baby’,” he reminded him. “In addition, they inform me that you recently had to bring her back to Gotham following the completion of your business deal with Queen Consolidated because someone informed you of an imminent threat to her life. Do you deny that the same people who targeted Lois are threatening her as well and that it directly relates to the Miller hearing?”

That wiped the smile off of his face entirely.

His entire body language changed at the mere mention of her name. He went from a slightly pompous and condescending businessman to someone considerably more…dangerous.

Wayne’s features darkened as he stepped forward into his personal space, his hands clenched at his
sides. Were Clark not nearly invincible he might have been tempted to cringe in fear and run in the opposite direction. As it was, he felt a fission of something cold run down his spine even though he knew the other man couldn’t possibly hurt him, “I don’t know where you got your information, Kent; but I promise you, if you print one word of that, not only will I have you fired, but I’ll make it my mission in life to see to it you never work for another paper ever again.”

“I don’t respond well to threats, Mr. Wayne,” he said in an even tone.

“Neither do I,” he said in a low growl that was completely alien to the man he appeared to be just a few moments ago, “but, for the record, that wasn’t a threat. A threat implies uncertainty and, believe you me,” he said in an icy registry, “I can do everything I say I can and more.”

Clark looked at him steadily and knew without a doubt that he meant it. Whoever this man was, it wasn’t the Bruce Wayne he’d been expecting. This man was intimidating in a way that not even Lex Luthor was; how though, he had no idea. “I wasn’t threatening you, Mr. Wayne, nor do I intend on painting a target on an innocent girl’s back,” Wayne stepped uncomfortably close but Clark held his ground, “but I will get to the bottom of what’s going on, one way or the other.”

The other man stared at him hard before relaxing his stance slightly, “Why?”

“Why?” He frowned, thrown off momentarily by his question in the same way he’d been when Perry asked, but quickly recovered, “Because that’s my job, Mr. Wayne; exposing the darkness to the light.”

“Exposing the darkness to the light?” He repeated dryly.

“Yes,” he bit out a bit more harshly than he’d intended to but continued, “I’m a journalist, Mr. Wayne; I grew up thinking of journalism as a heroic pursuit. I realize that to men like Morgan Edge and, yes, even you, this might be just another ‘business’ under your brand but to me this building stands for something, this job stands for something. Lois Lane is damn good at her job and she reported the truth. She doesn’t deserve to be chewed up and spit out by some kind of political machine and good people shouldn’t lose their jobs because they dedicated their lives to exposing a deeper truth.”

Wayne arched an eyebrow at that, “You said you think there’s a greater conspiracy at work here; if you don’t mind me asking, who or what do you think is at the center of this conspiracy?”
Clark decided to answer him honestly, “Frankly, I think Lex Luthor and his machine had something to do with what happened to her just like he’s probably the one who is behind the threats against you and your fiancée.”

“Lex Luthor?” He said dryly. “Luthor has been snapping at my heels for years, Kent, but we’re just business rivals, same with Morgan Edge just in case he’s your next suspect.”

“Exactly,” he said, choosing to ignore his sarcasm. “I don’t know what’s going on but all of this begins and ends with Luthor, I’m sure of it. As for Edge, it wouldn’t be the first time the two of them were in cahoots.”

“Cahoots,” the other man muttered with an amused look as he stuck his hands deep in his pockets and assumed a deceptively casual pose.

Clark ignored the blatant sarcasm being leveled at him and plowed on through, “Yes, Mr. Wayne; cahoots. Rumor has it that they go way back, all the way back to their beginnings as street kids living on the Southside. Luthor and Edge have always played well together. Luthor gave Edge the seed money he needed to start his company to begin with and, even all through the Miller thing, Edge’s Galaxy News station was heavily supporting Luthor as a possible presidential candidate in the next election even though he has never even once announced his desire to run for public office.”

“Wouldn’t that give Luthor even more incentive *not* to become embroiled in a high profile conspiracy?” He drawled.

“Or it does the complete opposite,” he posited. “Before Miller, Luthor was a joke candidate like Donald Trump was back in 2008. Now that this story has broken nationally, his TVQ is through the roof. Miller is being painted by Edge as a right wing martyr for the cause and Luthor looks like a successful businessman who was being dogged by an unstable leftwing reporter with an agenda. They’re turning him into Ollie North and saying that the senate committee tried to serve him up as a patsy but, instead of going along with it, he fought back. You have to admit,” he said pointedly, “when the public starts looking at a man like Lex Luthor as the underdog, something is very wrong.”

“And how does this circle back to me and mine?” He asked. “I could understand him going after Lois and the paper, even though your logic is flawed at best, but why would he come after my supposed fiancée as well? As far as I know, Baby has never even met Lex Luthor.”

Baby again, he thought. Damn it, does this woman even *have* a real name? Who spends their entire life dealing with being called ‘Baby’ anyway? He got a sudden image of an emaciated little society princess who teetered around on sky-high heels and carried a little dog in a purse, then
immediately felt bad for it. According to the impression Perry left him with, this woman was probably somehow developmentally delayed and they probably infantilized her because she had the mind of a small child. It probably explained why they were all so protective of her that they didn’t even use her real name or allow the press anywhere near her.

Now he looked at the smug, arrogant countenance of Wayne and, seemingly against his will, began to soften towards him. Not only was the man the patron saint of displaced children who worked tirelessly for his charitable foundation, he also fell in love with an innocent woman with the mind of a child. It should have bothered him perhaps, made him think the man was taking advantage but, instead, it just made him really want to like him even though he was kind of an ass. No wonder he was thinking of doing whatever it took to protect her; especially if she had no way of protecting herself.

He swallowed down the sudden flush of guilt he felt at possibly exposing an autistic woman to intense media scrutiny and soldiered on, “I don’t know why they’ve targeted her, but I intend to find out,” he said firmly. “If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say Luthor was going through her to get to you. It wouldn’t be the first time he intimidated people by threatening their loved ones.”

Of course, it wasn’t really *his* guess but Wayne’s; he was merely parroting his own words back to him to see how he’d react.

“I’ve heard those rumors as well and, as far as I know, no one has ever been able to prove any those allegations against Luthor,” he said neutrally.

Clark didn’t so much as falter, “Yet. However, just because I can’t print it at the moment, that doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

To his surprise, the muscles in the other man’s face relaxed and he pasted on a look of wry amusement, “Fine, tell you what; personally I think you’re chasing your own tail with this but if you find any evidence of what you claim, I’ll make sure it gets printed. Furthermore, if you share any information you get pertaining to me and mine, I’ll even give you whatever quotes you need for your article and an exclusive if and when I do ever decide to get married even if I disagree with where you’re going with it.” He reached inside of his coat and pulled out a silver business card case and handed him an expensive looking silk embossed card with the Wayne Enterprises logo on the front. “That’s my personal cell number, Mr. Kent. It’s one I only give out to my closest business associates and family members so consider this an act of trust on my part. Until then,” his eyes hardened once more even though his tone remained almost friendly, “keep Baby out of it. She has nothing at all to do with Lex Luthor or this crusade of yours. If you find anything that leads back to her, you come to me first, understood?”

Putting aside his own misgivings about using ‘Baby’, he channeled Lois and went for cold
professionalism instead, “I appreciate the offer, Mr. Wayne, but I think we both know that you’re not going to be the owner much longer and if Morgan Edge gets his hand on the paper the last thing he’d be interested in is uncovering the truth,” he shot back then tightened his jaw, his conscience screaming blue murder by that point. “As for Miss Fox,” he began reluctantly, then paused, “I want you to know I never had any intentions of dragging her name through the mud. I do have some ethics, believe it or not. As long as it doesn’t violate the integrity of my investigation I will do my best to shield her as much as possible.”

“But?” He prompted.

“But I won’t compromise my journalistic integrity even if it does mean getting the inside track.” He held out the card to return it but Wayne didn’t make a move to take it from him. He shifted uncomfortably, “You do know, however, that if I found this information, then so can one of Morgan Edge’s so-called journalists,” he told him, meeting his eyes. “And I assure you, they won’t be nearly as considerate or as accurate in their reporting as I am and, if it means taking you down a peg or two, your fiancée’s reputation will be the first thing on the chopping block right after your own.”

Perry’s stern and disapproving glare popped into his mind as he came dangerously close to holding the story up as a threat but that wasn’t what this was about. He wasn’t intending to intimidate him, he was merely reminding him that once Morgan Edge had control of the paper, Wayne and everyone in his inner circle would have targets painted on their backs the second the ink on the contracts dried and, from the look in the other man’s eyes, he knew it.

Attempting to take some of the sting out of his words, he drew back the hand holding the card and added, “Look, I get why you’re so protective over her; if it was me, I’d feel the same way, but they won’t. It won’t matter to them that Miss Fox is a victim or that she’s…” he fumbled for the right word.

“She’s what?” Wayne asked with a hard look.

“Special,” he said at last.

Wayne’s eyes softened at that and he almost smiled, “She certainly is special, Mr. Kent, but I never said she was my fiancée,” he pointed out. “In fact, I specifically told you that I wasn’t engaged to anyone.”

“Whether you are or not, it won’t matter to Edge,” he shrugged. “You should know that better than anyone. And, given your…Miss Fox’s unique, um,” he cleared his throat, “circumstances, it may make her particularly vulnerable to hurtful personal attacks. We both know that the man has no sense
of common decency and he’s certainly not afraid of lawsuits. If it strikes the right blow he’ll just write off the loss as the cost of doing business then use his media empire to spin it so he looks like the victim instead. If he gets his hands on the Planet then we’ll be the ones doing the muckraking; he’ll see to that personally.”

At the reminder of Edge’s last attempt to smear his reputation, a cold fury seemed to settle over him once more, “Fine, you made your point. I’ll hold off selling to Edge until the Miller thing is resolved one way or the other. That should give you some time to investigate this but, in the meantime, you won’t write a word about her, do you hear me?” He said with quiet menace, that grim light returning to his eyes. “I mean it, Kent. I’m not the kind of man you want as an enemy.”

“I’ll do my best, but if her name comes up as being attached to what happened at that hearing, I can’t make any guarantees,” he said honestly.

“Noted,” Wayne said sternly. “And, until then, I’ll do my best to see to it that you keep your job, but I make no guarantees, nor can I guarantee that the next time we meet I will be in as nearly a forgiving mood as I am now,” he returned with an intense glare. “And let me add that you’re damn lucky that I honestly believe you’re a crusader for journalistic integrity and not a extortionist who’s only interested in keeping his job.”

“This ‘job’ means more to me than just a paycheck,” he said easily, “but I wouldn’t want to keep it if it meant losing my soul in the process. Believe me when I say that hurting an innocent woman isn’t something I’m interested in doing. This is about protecting her and everyone else who has already been affected by whatever this is that’s going on and exposing the truth for what it is.” He held out his card to him again, “You should probably take this back.”

“Keep it,” he told him. “I didn’t give that to you as a bribe, Kent; I gave it to you as incentive. No one wants to get to the bottom of this more than I do,” Wayne said enigmatically before turning on his heel, “Good luck with your story and I hope to hear from you soon. Have a nice day.”

“You, too, Mr. Wayne,” Clark said staring after him as he flagged a cab and hopped inside. It was only after the man left that he released the breath he hadn’t even known he was holding.

“So that was Bruce Wayne?” He mused quietly as he reached into his back pocket for his wallet to stick the business card inside for safe keeping. He shook his head as he read it before slipping it into an empty slot. “Wow, that guy’s…intense.”

Especially considering that he just managed to unknowingly intimidate the crap out of Superman without even breaking a sweat.
The minute the cab pulled away from the curb, Bruce pulled out his phone and dialed.

“Sir?”

“Alfred, I need you to put together a dossier on Clark Kent,” he said in a low growl.

“Certainly, sir; how soon will you be needing it?”

“Immediately.”

“May I ask why?” The older man asked although Bruce knew he was already headed down to the Cave to do as he asked.

“Kent knows things he shouldn’t know and I want to find out how.”

She was running.

Hot rain ran down her back and, even if she had kept her glasses, the storm and the dark had left her virtually blind. She could feel the tiny stinging droplets of rain as they cut across her skin and her ears were filled with the roar of the wind and her own heartbeat.

In the distance she could see the old abandoned barracks as lightning lit up the sky and she covered her face instinctively, crying out in alarm as the wind sent a piece of sharp tin flying a bit too close for comfort. The rain, sweat, and blood soaking into her clothes caused them to stick unpleasantly to her skin. She began to pant loudly in fear and exhaustion, breathing in the coppery scent of blood and death that surrounded her, tasting it on her tongue as it invaded her sinuses. Her lungs burned and her stomach lurched but she never stopped, never slowed down.
She ran.

She hurt, everything hurt; her lungs hurt, her muscles hurt, she fell and twisted her ankle causing it to throb and pulse with every footstep but she had to get to Slade. She heard a whimper in the distance, like an animal crying out, and realized it was her.

She caught the glare of a flashlight as someone spotted her and heard a call go out. She dove behind the building and pressed herself hard against the metal siding as sucked the unpleasantly muggy air into her lungs.

It was so hot, too hot. Everything was hot. She was burning up from the inside…

She heard a growl and the bark of a dog, “I thought I saw something! Split up!”

They had dogs? When did they get dogs? She saw the shadowy silhouette of a soldier carrying an automatic rifle pass and tried to make herself as small as possible but the howling and barking kept getting louder. She might be able to hide from them, but not from their dogs. They would tear her apart if she didn’t wind up getting shot first.

She needed to get away from there and get to Slade.

The howling wind drowned out the barking and lifted the loose tin of the roof then slammed it down with a hollow metallic crash, over and over again.

CLANG!

CLANG!

CLANG!

The rhythmic pounding almost sounded like an alarm going off.

Her stomach twisted as the wind shifted and she could once again smell the gunman’s blood and
brain matter on her skin. She used a shaky hand to wipe her hair from her mouth, the other wrapped tightly around the gun, and smelled it all over her hands.

Tasted it on her lips.

She was covered in it.

Soaking in it.

Drowning in blood.

She tried her best not to be sick even as salt water filled her mouth.

She heard it again. The growl against the rhythmic clanging of the loose tin.

The gunman and his dog were coming closer.

“Felicity….”

Her head whipped around and her heart stopped in her chest as the lightning illuminated the sky, the flash glinting against his iris and causing Slade’s one remaining eye to burn into her soul.

“No…” she gasped. “No, no, no, no…you can’t…” She pressed tighter to the metal siding. “You can’t be here.”

It felt like something was holding her down. She was frozen in place; paralyzed. A heaviness settled over her chest and the growling increased.

“Where else would I be?” He chuckled, his body hidden in shadow but his voice remained. “We belong together, love. You’re mine, remember?”
“No…” she whimpered, her head whipping back and forth in denial. She tried to move her arms, strike out, but they were locked to her sides. She couldn’t breathe and she began to shake all over. She looked over Slade’s shoulder and saw his men surrounding her, giving her nowhere to go and no chance of escape. They were just shadows, their eyes almost glowing with malevolence in the dim torchlight. She heard the dog’s handler shout curses at the enraged animal as it struggled against its lead, snapping at the air and frothing at the mouth in her direction.

“Don’t be cross with me, darling,” he tutted, “I know I’ve been a bit negligent in my duties to you, but to make up for it I brought you a present,” he told her. “Two of them.”

The wind began to howl as the storm picked up and the clanging increased to the point that it was nearly deafening but all she could hear was her own heart beating out of her chest and the incessant barking of the dog. Slade held out his hands, his body cloaked in darkness. She could see the vague round shapes held tight in his gauntleted hands then fire tore across the night sky and she could see, finally see, the gifts he brought her.

Oliver…and Bruce.

He tossed their decapitated heads at her feet and she stared down at their slack jaws and bloody expressions of open-eyed horror forever preserved in death.

“No one takes what’s mine,” Slade growled, stepping forward to press his length against her and pinning her to the wall of the barracks. He ran his gauntleted finger that was still wet with both Oliver’s and Bruce’s blood across her cheek, “You belong to me,” he said right before his lips descended on hers and she felt his teeth bite through her lip.

Thunder caused the world to shake and bounce under her feet and a keening sound, like that of a wounded animal filled the sky and she realized she was screaming his name.

“Felicity!” Slade grabbed her arms and shook her, “Wake up!”

She tried to struggle but her arms were pinned to her sides and she couldn’t move.

She screamed and begged for him to let her go as the howling noise filled the sky.

“Wake up!”
Her eyes opened and she tried to fight but couldn’t. There was a weight over her chest and legs, she tried to buck it off but it was no use. The ground beneath her bounced and lurched as she tried to escape.

“Felicity stop moving or you’ll hurt yourself!”

“Is she okay? She’s bleeding. Ace, get down!”

She heard the growling noise again then the keening howl and looked.

“She just bit her lip. Damn it dog, shut the fuck up!” Renee yelled at Ace from where he was bouncing on the bed and alternating between growling at the two women holding her down and howling in distress. “And shut off that goddamn alarm! Shit!”

“Hey, what the hell is going on in here?” She heard Oliver’s voice and turned her head to see him and Dick rushing into the room. “Get off of her!”

“Oliver?” She whispered through her tears as he and Dick glared down at the two women who were basically sitting on top of her.

Dick immediately moved to the nightstand and pulled it open, “Where are her weapons?”

“I secured them as soon as the dog started freaking out,” Renee told him.

“They’re over there on the dresser,” Laurel told him from where she was lying across her legs. She looked up at her, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, shifting uncomfortably. “Um, could you guys please get off of me now?”

“Why weren’t these in the safe?” Dick bit out, checking the guns to verify they weren’t loaded.
“I don’t know,” Renee snapped at him then glared at the dog who was still howling. “Will somebody please shut this goddamn mutt up!”

“They weren’t loaded,” Laurel told him, also seeming to bristle at his accusing tone.

“Get off of her, now!” Oliver said as he glared between the two of them.

“Hey, back off, Richie-Rich,” Renee shot back but slowly let go of her arms and got up off the bed from where she was straddling her chest. “Are you okay now, babe?” She asked, her dark brown eyes filled with concern as she looked down at her.

“Yeah,” she breathed then rolled to her side so she could reach up to run her hand over Ace’s shoulder as Laurel let go of her legs.

“I’ll go get a washcloth,” Laurel said as she hurried into the bathroom.

“Are you alright?” Oliver asked, his hand reaching for her face. He looked intently at the split on her lip that she’d reopened and as soon as Laurel returned with the damp cloth he pressed it against her mouth.

“I’m okay,” she said, taking it from him as she sat up and dabbed at her lip tentatively. “Ace, hush!” The dog immediately stopped his keening howl and dropped down to his haunches so he could enthusiastically lick her cheek. She lifted her chin to avoid the long swipes of his tongue and scratched him soothingly behind the ears. He plopped down on the bed and stretched out so he could butt his head against her chest then rolled so his head was pressed against her stomach and his paws were draped across her lap. She looked around at all of the faces now looking at her in concern, “Is everybody else okay?” She looked down at the washcloth to check if the bleeding had stopped then put it aside.

“It’s not us you should be worrying about,” Renee shot back as Laurel handed her a box of Kleenex from the nightstand.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” she said, sniffling then wiped a tissue over her face that she realized was now damp with tears and sweat, “Uh, why are you guys in my room anyway? And what time is it?” She asked, reaching over to shut off the alarm on her phone and checking the clock.
“Just after nine,” Laurel told her just as she saw the glowing numbers on her smart phone. “Renee and I woke up when the dog started barking and came in here to see what was going on.”

She looked down at the large dog in her lap in concern and ran her hands over his short silky fur, “Is he okay? I didn’t…?”

“He’s fine,” Renee assured her. “Loud as hell but fine.” She shot the dog a dirty look, “For a second there though I thought he was going to take a bite out of my ass. You were screaming and crying out on the bed and when Laurel and I tried to get to you, he stood over you and started snapping and growling at us, basically telling us to back the hell off or else.”

“But he didn’t…?” She blanched as she ran a soothing hand over the dog’s back causing him to moan and shiver with pleasure before worriedly checking her friends for injuries.

“No,” Laurel told her. “We managed to calm him down enough so we could wake you up.”

“I think if this is going to be a regular thing, you might want to let the dog sleep on the couch next time,” Renee said, still looking at the oversized dog warily, “Frankly, I think I’d rather risk getting shot by a nine mil than face two hundred pounds of pissed off mutt any day.”

“He’s okay.” Felicity said flushing as she stroked the dog’s soft ears and pressed his head against her chest causing him to pant happily. “He was just a little worried, weren’t you?” He huffed out a low ‘woof’ and lapped at her hand before butting his large head against her for another scratch.

“He was worried? I thought my ass was about to be his new favorite chew toy!” The other woman snorted, crossing her arms over her chest as she plopped down beside her on the bed.

Instead of responding to her, she looked around the room again. Laurel and Renee were still rumpled and dressed for bed, Laurel in a pair of men’s style blue and white striped cotton pajamas and the other woman in a cotton camisole and loose pair of men’s boxer briefs they picked up at Killinger’s earlier that morning. Oliver and Dick, on the other hand, were suited up, minus their masks, and looked like they were just about to head out to go on patrol.

“Why are you guys here?” She frowned looking between the two of them.
“We figured we’d coordinate with the rest of the team before you head out to Orbital,” Dick shrugged. “Luke is supposed to be meeting us here in a couple of minutes, so…”

“Why here? Why not at the manor?” She asked them.

“This was closer,” he told her.

“This was closer than the manor?” She said dubiously, “The same manor that the two of you are currently staying in?” She narrowed her eyes at Dick’s seemingly innocent expression, “We’re not supposed to be heading out for a few more hours yet so why are you early and why are you in my room?”

“Yeah, when did you guys get here anyway?” Renee asked, frowning up at the two of them.

“I was right behind Renee and you guys weren’t here when we woke up,” Laurel added as she moved to sit on the end of the bed next to the other woman. “And since you’re suited up I’m guessing you came up through that clock thing Felicity showed us earlier.”

“Yeah, we got here a little while ago,” he shrugged. “Me and Oliver figured we’d work on setting up the alternate Batcave a little since we were waiting for you guys to wake up anyway.”

“So you were downstairs?” Felicity asked. “And you just so happened to come rushing up here just when I was having a night terror?” She pursed her lips as she examined Dick’s slightly guilty expression and Oliver’s more defiant one. “Cut the feeds and if you messed up my computers I’m going to be so incredibly pissed it’s not even funny.”

“Feeds?” Laurel repeated, her eyes sweeping the room before pinning both men with her narrowed gaze. “You were spying on us while we were sleeping? Can you even begin to comprehend how utterly creepy and perverted that is?”

“If I find out you two freaks had eyes in my room I’m kicking both of your asses,” Renee growled and the dog echoed the sentiment as he lifted his head and looked toward both men threateningly, his lips curling over his bared teeth.

“We weren’t spying on you guys,” Dick said quickly, “Just…” He gestured towards Felicity helplessly.
“Oh, well that makes it so much better then, doesn’t it?” Laurel retorted sharply with a scowl. “It’s not us that you’re stalking; just Felicity!”


“Audio, video, or both and did you set it to record?” She asked, placing a hand on the dog’s stiff shoulders and briefly wondered what would happen if she said the words, ‘sic ‘em boy!’.

Maybe it would be something like right out of Stand by Me, as in an ‘Ace, sic balls!’ kind of deal.

She would be okay with that actually.

“Record?” Laurel asked incredulously, “You were recording her? Wait, you knew about the cameras already?” She turned to Felicity, “So…does that mean you and Bruce are into…?” She asked with a slightly naughty twinkle as she watched her flush crimson, “Well, alrighty then.”

“It’s not…” she sighed, “It’s for security purposes and I cut those feeds weeks ago for a reason.” She tilted her head slightly, “That…reason in particular.”

“Hey, no judgment,” Laurel snickered.

“Still, what you guys do in your bedroom is your own business. You two though… You’re a couple of sick…” Renee just glared at them, “What the hell? What if she had been naked?”

Oliver looked completely unaffected but Dick, at least, had the good grace to look embarrassed, “I was just doing what Bruce told me to and keeping an eye out for her.”

“While she was sleeping?” Laurel said sarcastically.

“Again, what if she was naked?” Renee asked them. “Unless, of course, Bruce told you to watch his *naked* girlfriend while she slept? I never thought Bruce was the kind of guy who would be into that kind of kink but, hey, what do I know? Either way, unless Felicity was cool with it, that’s
bullshit and you’re all a bunch of perverts.”

“Did he ask you to…?” Laurel asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course not!” Dick blustered, looking cornered all of the sudden.

“Besides, it’s not like I haven’t seen it before,” Oliver said drolly as he leaned against the armoire.

“See what I mean?” Laurel said, gesturing toward Oliver as she turned to Renee, “That! That right there was a totally asshole-ish thing to say and yet, nope; not so much as a hint of shame.”

“Okay, gotcha,” Renee nodded to herself then, as if reading her mind, she said, “Ace! Sic ‘em!”

The dog immediately went from his relaxed and prone position to nearly two hundred pounds of pure aggression as he leapt to his feet, baring his teeth in a low dangerous growl.

“Hey! Whoa!” Dick said backing off and Oliver immediately went into a defensive stance.

The dog leapt off the bed and barked at them in a deep thunderous tone as he herded them out of the room slowly.

“Get down, Titus!” Dick ordered but the sound of his other name merely made Ace lunge forward aggressively. He moved further back towards the door, his hands held out towards the dog in a calming gesture. “Call him off, Question!”

“Why? It’s not like he can hurt you; you two turds have on body armor, remember?” She drawled with an evil smirk. “The worst that can happen is he cracks a tooth on your perverted asses.”

“Call him off now!” Oliver told her through gritted teeth.

“Or what?” She asked, cutting her eyes in his direction.
“Just do it!” He ordered as the now very dangerous looking animal snapped at him and continued to bark.

She grinned toothily, “Good boy, Ace; now bite that one in the ass and try not to catch anything. I hear he’s been around,” she said waving dismissively in Oliver’s direction and causing the dog to let loose with several loud barks as his muscles tensed. “Or better yet…hey, you did remember to wear a cup under those leather pants of yours, right Hood boy?”

“Don’t make me have to hurt this dog!” Oliver snapped.

“You wouldn’t…” he looked around uncertainly and sighed, “You wouldn’t hand over the guns and I was concerned because Bruce didn’t want me to talk to anyone else about what happened to you. I was worried someone might get hurt.”
workstation,” Oliver said with a hint of irritation. “We were downstairs in the Lair sparring and, the next thing I know, the sound of you screaming starts blasting over the speakers.”

“It’s not the Lair, it’s the FelicityCave, and I already know you had nothing to do with it,” she told him. “Not only have I trained you to stay away from my computers but you’ve also got to be the only CEO of a major tech company that can’t even figure out how to use Facebook. Actually, I’m almost more surprised Dick figured it out because he can barely use the microwave.”

“Hey, I’ve… gotten better at that stuff,” Dick flushed.

“And I refuse to call it the FelicityCave,” Oliver added. “I’ll call it ‘the Cave’ or ‘the Lair’, but I’m not calling it that. Besides, it’s not a cave, it's a… subway thing.”

“You’re just jealous because Felicity has a whole huge underground subway platform and a set of cool underground tunnels while you have to hang out in the basement of a night club that caters to people who think Britney Spears’ music is classic rock,” Laurel said dryly.

“Dude,” Renee chuckled shaking her head, “That’s just sad.”

He scowled at her, “I--!”

“What’s going on?” Luke asked ambling inside, “Why’s everybody in Felicity’s room? What, are you guy’s having a slumber party or something?”

“Yes Luke, we’re having a slumber party and forgot to invite you,” Felicity said, looking towards her brother who was suited up as well with a scowl. “Now, if all of you will excuse me, I need a shower.”

“Hey, did you pick up any Pop Tarts or Toaster Strudel?” He asked before catching the look she was shooting him then backing off, “Fine, whatever; I hope you picked up some decent cereal because I’ll be in the kitchen when you’re ready to get over that crabby attitude of yours, jeez.”

“So what else is new?” Felicity muttered.
Laurel sighed and got up off the bed, “I’m going to hop in the shower, too. Are you sure you’re okay?” She asked.

Felicity nodded, “I’m fine; I’ll be out in a minute.”

“A shower sounds good to me,” Renee said, getting up as well and stretching. “You know, if either one of you ladies wants to conserve water I’ll scrub your back if you scrub mine?”

“Out,” Felicity told her as Laurel snickered at her.

“Just trying to do my part for the environment,” Renee said off-handedly.

“Hey,” Felicity said, catching her wrist causing the other woman to look down at her inquisitively, “I didn’t, um…?”

“We’re okay, honey bunny; no biggie, I’m good,” she assured her. “Vic used to have some pretty tough demons himself and once, when we were coming off a tough case, I tossed my old partner across the room after nodding off on his couch so I knew how to handle it. Shit like this is the cost of being the boss, y’know? We see stuff every day that the human brain just wasn’t designed to handle so dealing with the occasional nocturnal freak out is just par for the course in our line of work.”

“Thanks,” she nodded.

“And anytime you want to check out my loofah skills, you just let me know,” she added with a wink.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said dryly.

“Meet you in the kitchen in a few for breakfast?” Laurel asked, coming up to give her shoulder a squeeze.

“Yeah,” she said giving her a grateful smile for the fact that neither of them so much as attempted to cross-examine her nor did they try to smother her in well-intentioned platitudes; they merely went about their day as if everything was normal.
Which, given who they were and what they did, it probably was.

“I’ll make the eggs,” Renee said, heading to the door. “I can make any kind you want as long as it’s scrambled. Sometimes I even go all out and add cheese.”

“Scrambled is good. Hey, Laurel; make sure Ace has food in his bowl if I don’t get there first.”

“Yeah,” Renee said, tossing Dick and Oliver one last mischievous look, “that reminds me; I owe that mutt a bone.”

Oliver and Dick gave her a disgruntled look while Laurel just grinned, “I’ll take care of it; c’mon, boy,” she called out and the dog happily followed them out of the room leaving only her, Dick, and Oliver behind.

“Go downstairs, cut the feeds, erase the footage, and do it now,” she told Dick in an uncompromising tone.

He offered her a pained look, “Baby, I was only trying to--”

“I didn’t want to say this in front of Renee and Laurel, I really didn’t want to say this in front of Oliver but I already know he has no intentions of leaving the room,” Felicity said throwing him a pointed look, to which Oliver arched an eyebrow and got comfortable as if to say ‘too right’, “but you once took great pride in the fact that you and Bruce were nothing alike and that you were never going to become him,” she said pointedly.

“I’m not,” he said, taken aback.

Felicity’s eyes met his, “Bruce didn’t turn those cameras back on, you did. Not only that, but Bruce may not be perfect, but he’s at least trying to trust in that I can take care of myself; what’s your excuse?”

His mouth fell open and he paused before scowling, “I’m nothing like Bruce! I’m not trying to control everything or implying that you can’t take care of yourself, but--!”
“But what? What is it? What has you so spooked, Dick? The guns? The fact that I have blood on my hands? That I’m no longer the woman I was four years ago and you aren’t all that sure I can be trusted anymore?” She asked in an almost casual tone.

“Yeah, actually; all of that bothers me,” he said boldly as he folded his arms across his chest in the same way Bruce did whenever he was about to lose an argument he didn’t want to. “The Felicity I knew and this version of you just don’t gel, sorry.”

Oliver fell back, the tick in his jaw giving her the impression that he wanted to defend her but was trying very hard to keep out of it instead.

He was learning, she admitted silently.

“I’m sure,” she nodded, “Four years is a long time in our world, as well you know. And this is *our* world,” she emphasized. “Bruce kept me on the periphery when I was with you guys but a lot has happened since then; some good, some bad, and everybody changes. After all, when you run with masks it’s evolve or go extinct and, as someone recently pointed out to me, I’m a survivor and I make no apologies for that. However, that said, if I was a betting woman, I’d say that the biggest thing that bothers you isn’t the guns or my willingness to use lethal force when necessary, it’s the fact that Bruce and I are together now.”

“What? Where the hell is that coming from?” He scoffed, but she could see that hint of something in his eyes that told her she was on the right track.

She drew her knees up to her chest under the covers and stared at him searchingly for a moment, “Don’t get me wrong; I know you’re genuinely concerned about me and I think, deep down, you want Bruce to be happy but you just don’t think it’s possible for him to give up the Bat, settle down, and make that kind of commitment, do you?”

“No, I don’t,” he admitted with a hint of defiance. “I think that, in the long run, he’s going to wind up hurting you or hurting himself and, given the fact that you’ve obviously been through some kind of major trauma, the last thing either of you need to be doing is planning a life together.”

She saw Oliver give him a look of grudging approval and stopped herself from rolling her eyes at them both. “So, in order to protect Bruce, you’ve been keeping an eye on me?”
“It’s you I’m trying to protect, not Bruce,” he objected. “He can take care of himself, you can’t.”

She nodded once, “So, again; you think I can’t protect myself?”

“No,” he huffed in frustration, “I think you have skills both on and off the field; I think you’re a damn good mission tech, from what Bruce and Tim told me, and from what I saw last night, I think you can handle yourself in a fight even if I may not agree with your methods, but when it comes to dealing with Bruce? No,” he said unapologetically. “I think he’ll wind up destroying you, not because he doesn’t love you, but because he does. He hurts everyone who gets close to him, Felicity; everyone. He’s driven away every woman who has ever tried to love him, every single one including Selena, because he has to have absolute control over everything. You know why she left?” He asked before answering his own question before she could, “They’d been fighting a lot and he was pushing hard for her to retire from being Catwoman and for them to be exclusive. She refused and got shot helping him out. After she recovered, she tried backing him up again and he walled her out, said he didn’t want her there, that he couldn’t use someone on his team who had an obvious death wish so she left. He told her they couldn’t work and made it impossible for them to be together and yet the second she left, he tried getting her back. It’s the same push me/pull me bullcrap he tries on everybody but Selena was the only one off us smart enough not to fall for it.”

He paused, his expression deadly serious as his eyes met hers, “When he breaks your heart, and he will, when he walls you out or gets you hurt or killed, it won’t be like it was with the rest of them because they weren’t really family; you are. You’re Lucius’s daughter, Tam and Luke’s sister, hell, every damn one of us; me, Tim, Alfred, Barbara, loves you like you’re blood, but every woman Bruce has ever loved has wound up dead or so damn destroyed by him they never recover. He’s toxic, Baby. I love the son of a bitch, but I know exactly who and what he is. His last girlfriend, the one he had a while back? Charlotte, I think? She nearly died when she got stabbed in the abdomen then moved to Paris because she couldn’t hack being Batman’s girlfriend! That’s okay though because none of us really got attached but when he hurts you, it’s going to blow up in all of our faces.”

He took a breath, “And I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I’m especially worried because it’s obvious that, right now, you’re not thinking very clearly and that he’s taking advantage of you by railroading you into this marriage. Given what happened with the carjackers last night and the other violent episodes you’ve been experiencing—” Oliver stepped forward, fists clenched at his sides, but Felicity stopped him with just a look. “—I think that someone should be looking out for you since neither you nor Bruce seemed to be capable of thinking rationally.”

She tamped down her own irritation to observe Dick’s body language carefully, “And what about when Bruce said he was giving up the mission? Was offering you the cowl so he could retire an irrational decision on his part?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “He won’t give it up,” he told her. “He can’t.”
She wasn’t blind to the fact that Oliver had once again fallen back to wait and see how the conversation progressed. She made a noncommittal noise, “Why not?”

“Because the Bat costume isn’t just armor, it’s his skin,” he told her simply. “Bruce Wayne and his three piece suit is the costume, not the other way around. He tried giving it up before and he’s always come back; first after Bane broke his back, then after Damian,” his eyes grew haunted. “If you’re doing this because he promised you a home and family then you need to get out now because that will never happen; he isn’t the man you think he is, Baby. He won’t give up the cowl, he won’t ever trust himself enough to have kids unless it’s to recruit them, and he’ll never be able to put you before the mission. I’m sorry, but that’s the truth.”

She glanced over towards Oliver. He was leaning against the armoire, arms crossed with a smug expression on his face as he waited for what he knew from experience was coming and obviously happy that, for once, it wasn’t directed at him.

Not yet anyway.

Enjoy this moment while you can, she thought; because you’re next.

She tilted her head and pursed her lips at him before taking a deep breath, “You don’t want it, do you?” She asked him.

“Want what; for you to get hurt? No, I don’t,” Dick said firmly.

“I’m sure that’s true, but you also don’t want to be the Batman,” she said matter-of-factly.

He snorted derisively, “I was the Bat. For over five months I wore the armor, remember?”

“But then he took it back,” she said simply.

He shrugged, “So?”
“Did you want to keep it?”

“Of course, but it was Bruce’s and he had a right to take it back so I gave it up,” he said with a closed-off expression.

She hummed in acknowledgement, “You know, when you went off as Nightwing, I never told you this, but I really liked the design of your costume better than Bruce’s.”

“Okay.” He frowned in confusion, “Thanks, I guess.”

“No, really,” she said quickly. “Your armor was much more practical, more efficient, streamlined, and, I’m sorry, but that cape has got to be a pain in the ass to get used to. I mean, I know it’s a functional part of the costume but, really, that thing weighs a ton and given your skills as an acrobat, it must have slowed you down a lot.”

“I got used to it,” he said guardedly. “Why are you--?”

She cut him off, “I mean, look at Oliver’s costume,” she pointed to Oliver who looked mildly surprised that he was being dragged into their conversation. “When I first came onto Team Arrow, I was…frankly, I was less than impressed with his gear.”

“Really?” Oliver said with a slightly hurt look.

“No offence,” she hurried to tell him. “I mean, you looked good in it, but I was used to guys who wore state of the art battle armor and you do have a tendency to get hurt a lot.” He gave her a sullen look but she continued on turning to Dick instead, “If there’s one thing about being with Team Arrow that I could change; you know, if I could…go back in time,” she said with a thoughtful frown, “I would’ve come clean about the Batman thing a lot sooner if only to get them better armor. Better armor, but not Bruce kind of armor,” she added. “I mean, I did upgrade their outfits a little. I designed Roy’s leathers and had extra padding and Kevlar made into the suit and when Oliver had to have his suit remade I added some stuff, but do you know why I never went for full on armor?” She didn’t wait for an answer, “Because, like you and Tim, Oliver relies on speed and stamina, not power punches and brute strength like Bruce. In fact, you guys are pretty evenly matched in that regard,” she said contemplatively. “Of course, the leather and Kevlar in his suit might not be as good as your full-on armor but, just like you, he mostly uses more acrobatic combat styles like Parkour, Kyudo, Escrima, and Capoeira as well as melee style fighting techniques like Hwa Rang Do and White Crane style Wing Chun. Because of that, he needs something light that allows for speed and ease of movement. Even convincing him to go from greasepaint to a domino mask was a chore because he was afraid a mask might interfere with his line of sight and slow him down.”
“So Oliver and I should go get beers later and talk shop; I get it, so what’s your point?” Dick asked, looking at her slightly askance.

“My point is this: When you took over for those five months, if you thought Bruce was giving up the Bat and you were the one stuck wearing the cowl from then on, why didn’t you modify the costume to better suit your strengths and skills? Why keep that leather and Kevlar cape that weighs a hundred pounds or more? Why keep the bulky body armor? Why not just stay with something more streamlined like you had with Nightwing or something lighter and more tech heavy like what Luke has?”

“Because it’s part of who the Bat is,” he said with a frown. “It—the suit—is iconic.”

“Iconic; good word,” she mused. “So if the Bat is so sacred and iconic, why become him in the first place? Why not let the Bat fade away, retire the jersey so to speak, and just be Nightwing?”

His face darkened, “Because Gotham needs Batman, not Nightwing.”

“But it had Nightwing,” she pointed out. “For five months you were this city’s guardian.”

“It had the Bat,” he corrected.

“It had the suit,” she countered. “You were still Nightwing just in Batman’s armor.”

“Are you saying I was just the guy in the suit?” He asked with a hint of anger.

“I’m not, you are,” she told him. “I’m telling you that Dick Grayson, Nightwing, bled for this city, fought for this city, and kept the wolves at bay all by himself while Bruce, for whatever reason, justifiable or not, took a runner. You’re saying that it was a suit that did it. Then again, you also said the suit was Bruce’s skin so…”

“Stop trying to get in my head, Baby,” he said irritably. “This isn’t about me.”
“Isn’t it?” She asked slowly.

“No, it’s about you!”

“So it would seem.” She nodded and pursed her lips, “According to Barb, you and Bruce barely talked in more than a year but, since you came back, you’ve been calling Bruce every five minutes, reporting on my every movement, watching me like a hawk, and now you’re going so far as to monitor my sleep when, given the speech you just got though making about how our relationship is one big huge mistake, I’d think you’d be calling him on his shit then washing your hands of it when it does blow up in his face.”

“I’m just trying to help,” he grumbled. “I’m sorry if I went a little overboard, okay?”

“I appreciate the support Dick, I really do, but I can handle myself,” she told him. “I know it may not look like it, but I’ll probably figure this out on my own sooner or later. I also appreciate you helping me with this Orbital situation.”

“But?” He asked warily.

“But you have a choice,” she said with a knowing expression, “You can get your head out of your ass and stop trying to be Bruce since we both know that he’s not who you want to be, or you can continue trying to wear another man’s skin until you wind up becoming him and we both know what that means.” She sat back against the headboard and looked at him unflinchingly, “I love Bruce, don’t get me wrong, but you could’ve saved some time and not worried about giving me the whole ‘he’s an asshole’ spiel. I know he’s an ass; I’m not going in blind.” She sighed wearily, “Dick, the best part of you was always your heart; you made Bruce better even when the two of you fought like cats and dogs. You will always be the one who made the Bat a hero because you’re the one who taught him about being family, but you have this idea in your head that in order to do what Bruce does you have to become him and you don’t. You’re not Bruce, you don’t need to be Bruce, so stop trying to be him and go back to being yourself. Stop looking at me and thinking ‘What would the Bat do?’ Frankly, I can only put up with one Bruce Wayne right now and even that’s a struggle,” she snorted. “If I have to deal with two of you I’m likely to reach for my gun again and, this time, I won’t need a night terror as an excuse.”

“I’m not--I really am trying to look out for you here,” he said flushed.

“I realize that which is why I haven’t smacked you upside the head yet,” she told him. “That said, either cut the shit or I will have to hurt you. Badly.”
“Seriously,” he said with a smirk.

She offered him a dangerous smile, “Don’t let the adorable façade fool you; if you think what I did to those carjackers was intense, you should see what I can do with access to an investment portfolio and Wi-Fi.”

“I’ve seen her donate a guy’s entire life savings to Green Peace in less than a minute and drain several off-shore accounts in seconds,” Oliver offered helpfully. “I wouldn’t push it if I were you.”

“Noted,” Dick said taking a deep breath, “I’ll cut the feeds and give you space from here on out. Are we still good?”

“We’re good,” she said cheerfully. “Do it again and we won’t be, but right now we’re good. And I meant what I said about the cowl; if you don’t want it, tell him. Let him know you’ll take care of Gotham but only if you can do it as Nightwing, not Batman. If he wants to retire the Bat, then the costume goes into the case and stays there. He can like it or lump it, but don’t use me or my relationship with Bruce as an excuse to avoid having that conversation, got it? I never asked him to give up the cowl; that was on him, not me. I would be just as happy with a full-time Bat or a part-time Bat as I would a full-time Bruce Wayne. I never asked him for a commitment or marriage either. In fact, I told him we didn’t even have to officially date. This whole thing was purely Bruce’s idea so your issues are your own, not mine, and if this whole thing blows up then I’ll deal with it myself. Are we clear?”

“Yeah, crystal,” he breathed out and looked at her sheepishly, “I’ll…go downstairs and take care of the feeds now,” he told her then gave Oliver a nod before exiting the room.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Oliver smirked in her direction, “Have I ever told you how turned on I get whenever you say the words ‘get your head out of your ass’?”

“Even when it’s not directed towards you?” She asked lightly.

“Especially when it’s not directed towards me,” he grinned.

“No, but then again it’s so rare that you aren’t the biggest asshat in the room so I can understand why.”
Oliver came forward and sat on the edge of her bed before reaching for her hand and stroking his thumb over the back of it, “About the night terrors; are you really okay?”

“It’s just…my new normal, so yeah,” she said quietly, allowing him to continue touching her hand even though she knew it was a bad idea.

“I’m sorry,” he said, meeting her eyes with a pained look.

She frowned, “For what?”

“For Slade, for Isabel, for what’s happened between us, your nightmares; all of it,” he told her. “This is all my fault.”

She gave him a look of mild annoyance, “Not every bad thing in my life is your fault, Oliver. My bad dreams are not your fault, neither was Slade or Isabel,” she paused, “Well, Slade wasn’t your fault; ignoring my advice about that woman then sleeping with her totally was.”

He shut his eyes and grimaced, “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“Nope,” she said, popping the ‘p’. “We’ll always have Russia and not in a good way.”

He glanced at her, a look of deep regret making him suddenly seem older, “Sometimes…sometimes I wish I had never met you.”

She couldn’t help the sharp stab of pain that ripped through her at that but she managed to keep her voice steady, “Yeah, well, I guess I can understand that.”

He shook his head and squeezed her hand lightly, “Not for me, but for you,” he told her. “I used to look at you after we came off a mission and you’d have bruises or be bleeding and I’d think, ‘she shouldn’t be here’.” He exhaled roughly, his eyes slightly bloodshot and filled with pain. “I still remember walking into your office and seeing that pen hanging out of your mouth,” he smiled, “You were the first person to make me feel normal again, you know that? As normal as I could be anyway. I should’ve just left you alone; let you enjoy a normal life without all of this,” he added bleakly.
“‘Normal’ for me was never an option, Oliver. What you’re forgetting is that I was part of this world long before I met you,” she pointed out quietly. “I may not have been in as deep as I was able to get with you, but it was just a matter of time.” At his questioning look, she clarified, “Dick, despite his recent brainfart, asked Bruce to train me before I left Gotham. Bruce said no but, had I stayed, I would have eventually sought out that training elsewhere. I knew the names and locations of the people who trained Bruce and the rest of the team, Wildcat being just one of them. Plus, if I hadn’t gone to Starling, I thought about joining Luke in Africa. I didn’t know he was Batwing at the time but, once I got there, I would have figured it out. Luke is a pretty smart guy for the most part but he’s also kind of a hot mess on his own. I would’ve stepped in whether he liked it or not. He’s my big brother but he always brings out my inner Mama Bear, you know?”

“I’m very familiar with your inner ‘Mama Bear’,” he said ruefully.

“Yeah?” She grinned.

He smiled back, “I never knew that’s what it was called but yeah. You pretty much whipped all of our asses into shape at one time or another, kept me on schedule, made sure we were eating right. Don’t think I never noticed everything you did for us in the Lair or for me in the office; I noticed. I always noticed even when I didn’t say anything.” He paused, his eyebrows pulling down as his gaze swept over her face, “I should have said something a long time ago but I didn’t, not because I was a spoiled rich guy who expected that kind of thing from everyone, but because…”

“Because?” She prompted when he stalled out.

He tilted his head back and let go of her hand so he could scratch at his stubble which was longer than it had been in quite some time. “For me, the Lair was just a bolt hole, a place to train. It wasn’t a home until you made it a home,” he glanced at her again. “I loved my parents but, until I met you, I never realized what home meant. It sounds weird but you made me feel safe.”

“Me?” She said with a nervous laugh.

He nodded, then stared at the floor as though lost in thought, “You gave me, I don’t know, structure, balance…” his eyes took on a heavy cast, “You called me on my shit, never backed down, but when I felt scared or lost, you were always there.” He looked up at her and smiled, “In a lot of ways you were more of a mother to me than my own mother.”

“Yeah…that—that just doesn’t sound right. I appreciate the sentiment, but…” she cringed.
“Yeah, well, think about how I feel; here I am, head over heels in love with a beautiful woman who was, for the most part, my work mommy-slash-den mother for three and a half years,” he joked.

“That’s…just so wrong…” she said in amused disgust and, despite herself, she couldn’t help but feel a slight fluttering in the pit of her stomach at his words. “Oliver…”

“I know.” His smile dimmed slightly as he looked at her, “You know, the other thing I’ve been wondering about a lot lately is, if I’d taken your advice and gotten my head out of my ass sooner, where we’d be right now.” His hand reached for hers again and he brushed his thumb over her knuckles. “I thought about asking you out, you know,” at her inquisitive look, he clarified, “The first time I met you it was on the tip of my tongue to ask you if you wanted to go get some coffee.”

“I hope you would have at least offered to take me to a safer coffee place than your last one,” she joked.

His smile widened a bit, “That’s another thing; I’m usually not that bad of a liar but, for some reason, I’ve never been able to lie to you. I walked into your office and had this whole story planned out but the second I saw you, I just blanked out.”

“So ‘spilled a latte on it’ wasn’t your first choice?” She teased.

“No,” he said wryly. “I had a story about how my body guard was teaching me basic weapons training and I didn’t know the safety was off. My strategy was to come off as mildly incompetent but endearing. I was going to ask you to be discreet because there had been a recent kidnapping attempt on my life and I didn’t want anyone to know I was carrying a weapon, even if I was completely hopeless with it.”

“That’s better than the coffee shop in a bad neighborhood story but not by much,” she pointed out.

“It’s believable though,” he shrugged. “Most people who have a need for personal security have to undergo some sort of self-defense training as well. I even brought Diggle along to sell the lie but then I saw you and…” he exhaled roughly, “I’ve never been able to hide with you, Felicity. I spent almost four years fighting my instincts, running away from how I felt about you, and just when I finally get there…” He swallowed, “Had I acted sooner, if I kissed you, told you how I felt, where would we be right now?”
“I don’t know,” she said quietly. She met his gaze and bit her lip before answering, “Do you want to know my honest opinion?”

He nodded, “Yeah, I do. Always.”

“If you had asked me out I would have gone in a heartbeat; be it the first day, the first year, the next year, right up until the night we had sex, I would’ve always chosen you,” she said evenly. “There has never been a time when I didn’t love you, didn’t want you, and I still love you, but we would never have worked out.”

“Why not?” He asked, his eyebrows drawing together in mild dissatisfaction.

“We would have gone on that first date and, five minutes in, you would’ve found an excuse not to move forward,” she said bluntly. “Anything from your steak being overcooked to some asshat bad guy blowing up the restaurant with an RPG would’ve made you put on the brakes; you would’ve used it as an excuse to not be happy because that’s what you do. The only reason we ever got as far as we did was because it was in the heat of the moment. Had we gone the slow path, even though three and a half years of unresolved sexual tension is plenty slow if you ask me, it probably would’ve ended before the waiter even showed up with our drink order.”

“Maybe you’re right. Part of me thinks it would have ended in disaster,” he admitted reluctantly. “You’re right; my life is a mess and I need to figure out a way to make it work before I can make that kind of commitment, but part of me wonders if I had made my move, if I had asked you out to coffee or kissed you on any of the hundred different occasions when I really wanted to, right now we’d be lying in our bed back in Starling as we discussed all the mundane things people talk about when forging a life together.”

“I doubt we’d ever be mundane even if it had worked out,” she said, smiling through her sniffles as tears pricked the corners of her eyes.

He chuckled sadly, “Yeah, probably not. We’d be talking about blowing stuff up in one breath and which pre-school we should send our kid to in the other.”

“Connor’s in elementary school,” she reminded him.

“I was talking about our kids; the ones we’d have after Connor,” he told her.
Her mouth fell open slightly at that, “Oh.”

“Yeah,” he said with a sad but teasing smile, “I was thinking about it and realized that if we had gotten together then, chances are, there’s no way I would have ever been able to keep my hands off of you after that so, sooner or later, we would have had a kid, gotten married, the whole nine yards. Hopefully I’d be smart enough to do it in the right order, but either way is fine as long as it happened eventually. The morning after I fucked it all up,” he looked at her guiltily, “I was already on my way over to your place to try and salvage things between us. I told myself I was just going over there to make sure you were okay and help you pack but the truth is I couldn’t stay away from you for even a day. Actually, I couldn’t stay away from you for ten minutes. Even when we were fighting afterwards, all I wanted to do was kiss you and bury myself inside of you until the world just faded away…even though I probably would’ve just talked myself into giving you the ‘we can’t be together’ speech all over again.” He gave her a sheepish look, “You’re right, I am an asshole. I now realize what a dick move that would’ve been—hell, I knew it was a dick move then but I said it anyway.”

“At least you can admit that you’re both an asshole and a dick,” she muttered. “They say that’s the first step to recovery.”

“Yeah, well, when Wayne made the remark about you being pregnant—” She opened her mouth and he stopped her by squeezing her hand, “Yeah, I know, but after he said it, and later when we talked, I kept thinking that if I had acted on my feelings sooner we’d probably have a kid of our own right now. I even named him in my head.”

“Him?” She asked despite herself. “Not her?”

“Well, it wouldn’t matter either way but, yeah,” he admitted. “Something in me just knows it would have been a boy; maybe it’s because of Connor and the fact that I wanted to have a second chance with him, seeing him born, being there and watching him grow up, who knows?” He looked up at her, “We would have named him Tommy.” He smiled again although it was filled with melancholy and regret. “Did I ever tell you that Tommy’s full name was Thomas Arthur Merlyn?”

She shook her head, “No.”

“I should have put that on his tombstone but I didn’t think about it at the time,” he said quietly. “When we were kids we used to play knights and he would always brag that he was named after King Arthur and Merlyn the Magician while I got stuck with ‘Jonas’ after my great-grandfather.” He stared at the floor again, “I wasn’t really thinking clearly. I didn’t even really go to the funeral, I just arranged to have the funeral home take care of it.”
“It doesn’t matter,” she assures him.

“It matters,” he told her as he met her eyes again. “I never wanted kids, never wanted to build a life with anyone, and then I found out about Connor and I started to realize what my mom was talking about when she would use words like ‘legacy’.” He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees as he tented his fingers together and tapped them lightly against his lips, “Someday, sooner rather than later, I’m going to die. This isn’t the kind of life that leads to old age and I know that; I’ve always been fine with that. Then I met Connor and I realized that it doesn’t matter because he’s my legacy, but then I had to give him up and now that’s gone; he’s gone, you’re gone, and I’m alone and have nothing to show for it.”

“He’s not gone,” she corrected gently. “You only signed away your rights so he could enter ARGUS relocation, although I personally think we could have figured out a way around it. I mean, the woman ordered a drone strike on a major city; I certainly think we could have gotten through a little red tape and some legal hoops if we pushed it. The only reason Waller insisted on going by the book like that was so she’d have something to hold over you, you know that right?”

“Yeah,” he admitted with a nod before turning to her again. “I knew it then. If not, I certainly would have caught on at some point during the other hundred and fifty times you brought it up.”

“I’m persistent,” she teased. “It’s part of my charm.”

“It certainly is,” he said warmly. “Still, I did it because I thought I wasn’t good enough to be his dad and he deserved a clean slate—does deserve a clean slate. That’s also why I pushed you away; I thought you deserved a better life than the one I could offer you.”

“You need to stop thinking that way,” she told him. “Connor needs you and you need him.”

“I need you,” he told her. “I think if I still had you, I could figure it all out because you’d be there to remind me of that.”

“I can’t…” she swallowed.

“I know,” he said, inhaling sharply and scrubbing his hands on his pants’ leg. “I know but I still…” he shook his head, “I really messed up and I just wish I could hit the reset button and start over, you know? Do things differently, make better decisions,” he met her gaze, “I wish I made the decision to be with you sooner and I wish to God I just stayed in bed with you that night and never tried to send
“It happened the way it was meant to happen,” she said flushing. “I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I wish...I wish that I had gotten over my own issues and, I don’t know,” she said helplessly, “I do know that, even when things were at their worst, I wouldn’t have changed a minute of it because...” She looked at him, “Being your friend, being part of our team, those were the best years of my entire life and that’s all because of you.”

“You can still come back,” he said, taking her hand again. “You keep telling me that it’s not too late for me to be with Connor; maybe it’s not too late for us either.”

She scooted closer to him and took a moment to center herself before speaking, “There were times when I was with you that I came close to giving up and going home. I had a lot of doubts in the beginning, the way you went about things scared me sometimes and then there was Laurel and Helena, Sara...”

“I’m sorry,” he said his eyebrows drawn together in an expression of shame.

“No,” she said firmly. “We weren’t together and you had a right to try to find someone. I’ll admit, it hurt my feelings a little that you seemed to see everyone else but me--”

“I saw you,” he interjected. “I did see you, believe me, and I wanted you. From day one I wanted to be with you, only you, but I chose them because I knew I couldn’t afford to make a mistake with you and, in the beginning, I wasn’t capable of being the man you deserved; I’m still not but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to be.”

“I wasn’t either,” she told him. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I was just as empty as you were; maybe even more so because you at least had a purpose that drove you to do what you did. I was...” she licked her lips, “I was just going through the motions before you showed up at my door then, later, I stayed because you needed me.”

“I still need you; I will always need you,” he insisted gently.

She reached up to cup his cheek, “Since leaving Starling, I’ve discovered so much about myself, about who I am now. It’s not perfect, obviously. I still...” she exhaled roughly and looked around the empty room. “I’ve still got a long way to go, but I think I needed this; I think you need this, too.” She leaned forward until her head lay against his shoulder and he enfolded her in a loose embrace.
“I need you,” he repeated in a murmur as he stroked his fingers up and down her back and kissed the top of her hair. He pulled away and cupped her cheek gently, “I love you. I’ll never not love you; come home.”

She covered his hand with her own and gently pulled it down so that their hands were laying on the bed between them before speaking, “When I first came to Starling it was because I was running away.”

“How?”

“From Wayne.”

“He promised me a happy ending but I convinced myself that there was something there that wasn’t.” She flushed, “The first time we, um,” she glanced at him through a fall of dark lashes, “Anyway, it wasn’t anything I ever expected to happen and I thought that he was going to tell me to leave right after we had sex. I knew he didn’t love me or anything but I just wanted to feel…real.”

“You are the most real person I know,” he said frowning at her.

“To you,” she said easily, “but it was a hard time for me, I felt lost, and I wanted to feel something.”

“I’ve been there,” he admitted. “Is that why you’re with him now? Because I did something…?”

“No,” she said quickly, “That’s not why I’m telling you this. I felt invisible for a long time, my whole life actually, except with my family and Bruce; they were the only ones who ever really saw me but…”

“But?” He prompted.

“Something happened and I didn’t know how to process it,” she said reluctantly. “It made me feel cut off from my family even though they didn’t do anything and I was so used to pretending that I didn’t know how to express that. With Bruce, it’s like I didn’t have to, so when I had the opportunity to make that connection, I did. Now I realize how stupid that sounds. I mean, I was having sex with him so, naturally, he wasn’t going to kick me out of bed right away. He was going to keep me there as long as he wanted me, but I thought that him wanting me was the same as being needed. It wasn’t Bruce’s fault, like I said. It was my choice, my decision, but when the rejection finally came it still really hurt because I thought he was all I had left.” She bit her lip again, “When I met you for the first
time, I was two seconds from handing in my resignation and going home. I never told you that but it’s true. I know I looked happy, but I was lost and you and Dig found me; *you* found me,” she emphasized. “You gave me the opportunity to be needed again and I needed all of you in return.”

His eyes locked on hers with an almost mesmerizing intensity, “So what changed?”

“Nothing, everything,” she said with a sad half-smile. “Mostly it was Slade.” He tensed and she placed her other hand on his chest to comfort him, “Again, it’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it is,” he said grimly. “I created Slade, I brought him to Starling; I’m the one who put you on his radar to begin with.”

“My choice,” she reminded him. “That doesn’t mean that it didn’t change everything for me though. Before that day I always knew that what we did was dangerous but part of me believed that you’d always be there to rescue me.” He flinched and she made a soothing gesture by running her hand from his chest to his shoulder, “As horrible as it was, it taught me an important lesson because I finally knew what it was like to really be alone and to have to make the impossible decisions you and Bruce make every day. And yes, it haunts me; it will probably haunt me for the rest of my life, but I also saw how Ollie became Oliver after that. If you had asked me who I was before that day I could tell you; now…” she shook her head, “I don’t know who I am but I’m learning and if I go back to Starling, I’m never going to find out and, what’s worse, you’re never going to find out who you are either.”

He looked at her in frustration, “What are you talking about? I know who I am and I know what I want; that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

She rubbed her hand over her forehead and drew her legs up further, putting some distance between them, “As long as I’m there, neither of us will ever move on,” she said after a moment. “You’ll always find a reason not to move forward and I’ll always find a reason to stay static in hopes that someday you’ll catch up. Oliver, I love you; the truth is that I love you just as much as I love him. In some ways, I even love you more.”

“Then why do this? Why put us both through this?” He said with a hint of anger.

“Because I love you enough to let you go,” she said simply. “You were right that night when we talked on the phone; as long as I’m in your life, you can’t do what you need to do.”
“I was wrong!” He said stubbornly.

“No,” she disagreed, “You were right and it’s time for me to stop running just like it’s time for you to realize that you’re more than just the Arrow, Oliver. You have to be a man, too. Meanwhile, I need to start being my own hero instead of always waiting around for someone else to rescue me.”

“You are a hero,” he said brokenly. “You saved me more times than I can even count. Besides, Wayne will never give you what you’re looking for. Dick was right, that armor is his skin; he’s too far gone Felicity, but I still need you.”

“You keep thinking that I’m choosing him over you or that I expect something from him and you’re wrong. I never asked Bruce to give up the Bat and I don’t expect to live happily ever after. I stopped believing in happily ever after a long time ago, but I do know that if I’m ever going to move on then I have to start by stop running away. I need to see this through with Bruce because, right now, he needs me more than you do,” she ran her hand over his thick stubble and smiled, “I don’t need Bruce because he loves me more than you do or because he’s offering me something you can’t, I need Bruce because I have to believe that someday I can escape whatever this darkness is inside of me. I see Bruce, I see how he struggles with it every day, and I need to find that same strength inside of myself and, as I start to heal, he does as well. Right now, we’re two people finding our way together. When I’m with you, as much as I love you, I find myself sinking into the shadows and maybe that’s more on me than anything else. In fact, I know it is. Slade is my ghost now. He was yours but now he’s mine and I need to learn to live with it but every time I see…” she paused, “In my dream I’m always running.”

She looked up at him, “I’m running and stuff happens, but at the end of the dream it’s always just me and Slade. Sometimes it’s like it was that night, sometimes it’s different, sometimes it doesn’t even make sense, but it always ends with Slade embracing me and telling me I belong to him.”

He made a pained noise, “I’m so…I should have killed him the first time.”

“Don’t,” she told him, “Just listen.” She paused until he was able to meet her gaze again, “In the dream you die and it’s my fault.”

“Nothing you did that night was your fault,” he reassured her.

“I know that; logically, I know that, but in the dream I’m responsible for your death.” She felt a tightness in her chest but kept going, “Sometimes I kill you, sometimes Slade kills you, sometimes we do it together. Sometimes it’s just you; last night it was you and Bruce.”
“It’s just a dream; symbolic. Maybe…maybe it’s because I ignored you when we got back home?” He offered. “Maybe it stands for the fact that you’re still angry at me because of that or because you still feel like we should have included you in the mission from the beginning?”

“Maybe.” She took a shaky breath, “It doesn’t take a degree in psychology to figure out what all that means. Some part of it is guilt and me reacting to the trauma of that night, but a big part of it is because, yes, I’m angry and frustrated by the fact that it went down that way at all and that you and Bruce keep pushing me aside and treating me like I’m helpless. Mostly though it’s because…I don’t know,” she sighed. “I guess it’s because I sometimes feel like I’m not in control of my life. I think maybe the anger I feel in my dream is more about me than anyone else, you know? I think I need to find my own mission, Oliver; not yours, not Bruce’s, mine.”

“Your own mission; as in Orbital? Even if they are legit, which they aren’t, do you really think Wayne will let that happen?” He asked.

“It doesn’t matter what he wants,” she said. “This isn’t about him; it’s about me. For the first time I’m actually living for myself and I like that feeling.”

“This won’t end well, Felicity,” he warned her.

She nodded, “Probably not but, right now, this is where my gut is telling me I need to be. You’re right, Orbital might not be it but later, who knows? All I know is that right now I need to be in Gotham and you need to go home to Starling.”

“And later?”

“I don’t know.”

He got up from the bed reluctantly and walked over to the door before stopping to turn to her, “I’ll let you take your shower but, I want you to know, I’m staying until I know you’re safe.”

“Oliver…”

“I need to do this,” he told her. “If you really want me to move on then I need to know you’re okay
and, even then, I won’t stop hoping that you’ll change your mind and come home.” He paused, “I still love you.”

“I know,” she said quietly.

He nodded once, turned, and shut the door behind him.

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While she was in the shower and later as her makeshift family sat around the table eating rubbery scrambled eggs and leftover fruit salad, she kept turning her conversation with Oliver over and over again in her mind. It wasn’t until she was sitting in the van with Laurel beside her, both of them silent with the exception of the few factoids about starlings the other woman would offer up as she read them off her tablet, that she finally began to put it all together in her head.

Until she said it out loud to Oliver, she’d never really thought it all through; her night terrors, how she felt in the months after Slade, or even how she really felt about remaining in Gotham. She once said that Oliver was so busy reacting to everything, or reflecting on the mistakes of his past, that he never had time to plan or look ahead; he was always in the now, always in a state of fight or flight instead. What she didn’t realize until just then was that she had been guilty of doing the same thing.

Once, years ago, Dick invited Barbara, Tim, and her to Haley’s Circus to watch the aerialists practice their routines. He grew up in the circus and practically lived in a state of mid-flight from the moment he was born which was why his parent’s always called him ‘Robin’. The Flying Grayson’s were the biggest act Haley’s Circus had ever had, their dangerous stunts and record breaking aerobatics drew crowds from all over the world to watch them perform. They died when some thugs who were trying to shake down the owners, damaged the tension wire causing them to plunge to their deaths. Whenever she heard that story she always felt sympathy for his loss, but part of her always wondered why they took that risk to begin with; why do something that dangerous without a net?

Well, later that day she got her answer.

It was Barbara’s birthday, her first since she’d been paralyzed from the waist down by the Joker’s bullet, and to all of their surprise, he handed Barbara a gift bag with some soft leather ballet slippers and a leotard. He then threw on his own workout gear and carried her up the ladder so she could experience swinging through the air in the same way she had before the loss of her legs. It had been a profound moment for her, watching the love and care Dick showed her friend and mentor as he tied her legs together then placed her hands on the trapeze bar before pushing them both off of the
platform and into the air so she could fly again.

Until the moment she saw the look on Barbara’s face when she let go of the bar and hung in the air with nothing below her to stop her fall, trusting that she could grab the trapeze swinging towards her before gravity kicked back in, she never understood the how or why of it all. Why let go of the bar; what if you miscalculate and miss? Why walk across a wire that can snap at any moment? And why do it without a net to catch you?

She understood the mechanics of it, of course; the aerialist distributes mass away from the pivot point, thereby increasing the moment of inertia. This reduces angular acceleration because a greater force is required to rotate the performer over the wire. What she never understood was how Barbara or any of them could get past the voice inside their heads telling them not to get up there in the first place.

She watched, terrified yet spellbound, as this amazing woman who couldn’t even walk flew by willpower alone. At that moment, she stopped being a victim, she stopped being a hero, she stopped being crippled or earthbound, and became a bird. She hung in the air, suspended as if by magic, reached out across the expanse, and flew. Dick caught her midflight and it was the most amazing thing she’d ever been witness to; it was a moment of pure faith, love, and strength of will.

These men and women didn’t don masks and fight because they were heroes, even though they were. They didn’t do it because they were fearless, or for money, or fame. It wasn’t even just for the thrill of it; it was because they belonged up there. The sky was their home and they were birds, swooping and diving through space and walking on wires until their wings failed them or gravity caught up and then they crashed to their natural and unavoidable end without regret. It all came together for her at that moment and something clicked in her mind. They were birds and birds flew; it was in their nature but never for a moment did she ever suspect that she could be a bird as well.

Until she flew.

When birds learn to fly, it’s through an act of violence. The birds who once nurtured them, who they trust to bring them nourishment, protect them, and keep them warm, leave them and force them to fend for themselves or push them from the nest to live or die by their will and immature wings alone. They don’t choose to fly, they choose to survive.

And just then, it came to her. It was like she was back in the eye of the storm and the lightning lit up the corners of her mind making her entire world as bright a day.

She remembered watching Barbara fly without legs, she saw someone else’s arms reaching for her,
so she thought that was it; it was about someone catching you, it was about not being alone, end of story and cue the credits, right? Wrong, because…

Because for Barbara, it wasn’t about who caught her, it was about learning how to fly for herself again. It was about surviving through will alone; her will alone, not someone else’s.

Like Miranda said, she, like the birds whose name she took, were survivors. Starlings were gregarious little birds who painted the air with the thunder of their tiny wings in vast flocks called murmurations. However, even though they were songbirds, they were so aggressive and fearless that even raptors and other birds of prey looked upon them with awe and trepidation as they swarmed. They were fighters despite their diminutive size, intelligent and, according to the mythology that surrounded them, represented chaos, order, and love because love was both turbulent and enduring. Still, for all their strength and will to survive, they could be caged. These fierce little birds with their coats of many colors were highly sought out as pets for their ability to mimic any song and even human speech. They could easily be domesticated and complacent in their captivity, choosing not to see the bars that surrounded them and sacrificing freedom for comfort.

Was she just a little bird or was she a starling? Was that what she’d allowed herself to become? By hiding away, by being invisible and fading into the trees, had she built herself a gilded cage or was she fierce enough to fly alongside a raptor as its equal?

She thought about Sara and it was as though she could feel the brush of the other woman’s lips against hers as she said, “Felicity, sometimes I think you spend too much of your time hiding and not enough time singing. You put up walls and melt into the background but when you open up and let us see you, it brings the light back into the room. You need to sing, Cutie. Stop hiding and just start singing.”

Sara was the fiercest, bravest, strongest woman she knew, and yet, without even knowing it, she named her for these amazing little birds. Laurel was strong, resilient, flawed but courageous and she called her a hero. Renee and Barbara were tough, confident women who even Bruce respected and they saw Felicity as an equal and friend. Helena, for all her madness and anger, held a spark within her as well. She faced this woman down and proved to her that she could hold her own and saw the acknowledgement of that fact as Huntress looked on her with grudging respect afterwards.

All these beautiful, bold women; these warriors, had chosen to include her in their circle. They chose *her*, not Felicity Fox, daughter of Lucius, not Felicity Smoak, assistant to the Arrow, and not Baby, Batman’s girlfriend; they saw her, not the man protecting her, not the men who loved her, they saw the fellow warrior she had become.

Wasn’t it about time she started to see herself the same way they did?
She dressed down Dick for treating her like she was incapable of making her own decisions, spent all this time fighting against Oliver and Bruce who were always trying to save her; they pushed her away then pulled her close, treated her like a fragile broken-winged bird, but how could they possibly know what she was capable of if she’d never showed them? Only now were they beginning to see the real her because it was only now that she was beginning to recognize her own self.

Bruce was right; she was punishing herself for surviving. She was punishing herself because somewhere along the way someone had opened the door to her cage only she’d never noticed because complacency was easier.

She didn’t know what the future held. She still feared her memories of that night, still feared Slade’s ghost when he came to her in her dreams, but she was done hiding.

They were right; all of them were right. It was time to let go of her fear and sing. It was time to leave the cage behind.

“Are you ready for this?” Laurel asked, breaking her from her reverie as they approached Orbital.

Are you ready to fly like a bird of prey, little starling?

“I’m ready.”

Bruce sat on the rooftop across from Lexcorp and watched as the light in Sebastien Mallory’s office remained on despite the lateness of the hour.

“Watchtower, are you sure Mallory is still in the building?”

//He used his badge to enter the executive elevator and his office. It’s possible he exited on someone else’s badge but you yourself said he didn’t go through the lobby.//
“Can you hack the internal surveillance cameras?”

//I can try, this new system Baby programmed is pretty damn good, but say what you will about Luthor, his firewalls are fairly solid. // Lucius said ruefully. // Besides, I’m more of an engineer than a hacker; this sort of thing is more her wheelhouse than it is mine. //

He wasn’t going to say it out loud but he agreed with the older man’s assessment. He really wished Felicity was there with him and not just so he could keep an eye on her.

“Staying out here all night playing guessing games is getting us nowhere; I’m going in through the roof.”

He unleashed his grappling hook as Lucius spoke, // According to the computer, security is in level fifty-five and headed down. Mallory’s office is on fifty-two so wait until I give the all clear before heading to that level. //

“Affirmative.”

Bruce swung across the wide expanse to land lightly on the roof. He retrieved his line then waited.

// Okay, they’re on fifty-three. It should be safe to begin the breech. //

“Continue monitoring the situation in case they double back,” he instructed as he used one of Felicity’s new apps to hack the keypad within seconds.

// We have seriously got to convince Baby to consider working with Snyder down in WayneTech. // the other man muttered. // That skeleton key of hers is amazing. We’re talking Nobel Prize and the possible applications of this kind of mobile AI decryption technology is just...well, it makes a father proud. //

“I’ve been trying get her to see that but she’s stubborn,” he said lowly as he made his way down the stairs.

// No surprise there. She’s her mother’s daughter. Okay, they’re on fifty-two—go. //
Bruce bypassed the alarm and entered the corridor. He listened carefully as he hugged the shadows. “Where are the maintenance crews?”

//Still on twenty so you should be good for a while in case you need to look around.//

Bruce stepped out into the hall and made his way towards Mallory’s office, still keeping out of the range of the security cameras. He paused as he neared his office, listening carefully, “Are you sure maintenance is on twenty?”

//Positive; why?//

“I’m hearing a buzzing noise, like the low hum of a vacuum cleaner.”

//Hang on, I’m nearly through the firewall.// He paused, //Okay, I’ve managed to hack into the security feeds and I’m looping the footage on that floor now.// There was the click of keys on the other end of the line. //I looked over the footage and Mallory definitely hasn’t left his office. He did, apparently take a meeting just before close of business. I can’t see with who, but it appears to be a woman. She left out around six or so alone.//

“Who was the meeting with?”

//I don’t know; she didn’t have a badge and followed someone else onto the elevator so I don’t think she works there. She’s wearing a trench coat, sunglasses, and scarf on her hair, plus she’s talking on a cellphone the entire time she’s entering and exiting his office which is preventing the camera from getting a clear shot. Facial recognition is a bust but by comparing her height with the door frame I estimate she’s between 5’6” and 5’8” without the heels, Caucasian, slim build, and appears to have dark hair. Unfortunately there are no feeds inside the office itself but I’ve run through all the footage and he should still be there.//

“I’m going in,” Batman said as he made his way to the door.

He opened the door and silently slipped through, taking in the appearance of the room. The buzzing, grinding noise was louder now so he crossed through reception and opened the inner door to Mallory’s office. There he found the source of the noise.
Mallory was slumped over the large shredder, his pants down around his knees and his bare buttocks exposed. His tie was stuck in the shredding mechanism, his head bobbing slightly as the machine struggled with the tangled silk lodged in its gears.

He didn’t need to feel for a pulse to know he was dead and had been for at least a few hours.

A vibrating latex butt plug was jutting out of his rectum and some kind of flesh colored cylindrical object was still pulsating around his penis although both toys’ batteries appeared to be dying. As he approached the desk, he noted the hardcore porn film still playing on a loop.

“Well, this is unexpected.” Batman swung around, instantly on alert. A man in a blue and red costume stood in the center of the room observing the scene with an expression of distaste. “On so many levels,” he added giving him the once over as well. “Hello Batman; you’re a little far from home, aren’t you?”

“Superman,” he said in a low rumble, his eyes taking in the other man’s appearance as well.

Unexpected was the word for it alright.

“I take it you were here to speak to Mr. Mallory as well?” He asked, his bright blue eyes flicking between him and the dead man. “So how did that conversation go exactly?”

“I didn’t kill him,” he said, turning his back on the other man and approaching the body.

“Autoerotic asphyxiation?” He asked, joining him, his expression still alert and guarded.

“No, this was murder.”

“How do you know?” He asked, turning to him and averting his eyes from the grotesque condition of the body.

“Most asphyxiophiliacs prefer a slow method of strangulation to draw out the pleasure. They put pressure on the carotid as they masturbate, usually kneeling or sitting, and ensure some sort of method of quick release from their bindings following orgasm. His tie isn’t tight enough,” he pointed
to the gap between the Windsor knot and his throat and the fact that his tie, while pulled taut, was not cutting off his blood or oxygen supply, “There’s no scissors or a knife near the body and, even though there’s a letter opener sitting out on the desk within reach, he didn’t attempt to cut himself free.” He stood near the body and stretched out his own arm to demonstrate, his gloved hand hovering over the object in question. While Mallory was shorter than he was with less reach, he still could have touched the opener and pulled it to him by his fingertips, “Also, his neck is broken.”

“Couldn’t the shredder have snapped his neck?”

“It takes between 1000 and 1250 psi of torque to break someone’s neck and the shredder doesn’t have that kind of power plus the angle is wrong.” He pointed to the position of his neck, the angle of the tie lodged in the mechanism, the bruises blooming around his throat, and lack of petechial hemorrhaging in his eyes, “This scene has been staged.”

//The woman from the surveillance footage was in and out of his office in less than twenty minutes.//

Superman’s eyes flickered slightly as he observed him carefully, “Do you know who did this?”

“No,” he said curtly.

//I have footage of her getting into a Metro Cab; I’m hacking their server now.//

“But you--?” Suddenly the other man frowned and looked up.

“What is it?” He said with a scowl.

//There’s a silent alar--//

There was a gust of wind as Superman left the room in a blur.

//--m on the top floor inside what the computer indicates is Lex Luthor’s executive suite. It has top level clearance only but the alarm appears connected to the inner office, not the door or elevator.//
“Footage?”

//None. Apparently they used our little trick with the feedback loop but whoever it was couldn’t get through the security inside and set off a failsafe alarm. Chances are they don’t even know what’s happening yet.//

“Where are the guards?”

//Stuck twenty floors down. I disabled all the keypads and elevators but that won’t hold them long and, unfortunately, that means you can’t move either. You’ll have to take the window.//

Batman walked over to the floor to ceiling plate glass windows, set a charge, then stepped back. “Is the street below clear?”

//Clear.//

He activated the charge causing the window to shatter outwards then stepped onto the ledge, firing his grappling gun towards the roof and allowing it to pull him upwards. His eyes counted the floors until he reached the right one then he stopped his ascent, covered his face with his cape, and swung towards the window, shifting his foot in his boot to activate the spikes in his soles and causing it to shatter on impact.

He landed inside the room, shook the glass from his shoulders, and watched as Superman fought a tall, raven haired woman dressed in black tactical gear…

…and, surprisingly enough, he didn’t appear to be winning. In fact, as he watched the two grapple, they appeared to be equally matched and at a stalemate.

He’d seen enough of Superman’s exploits to know the man’s physical strength was off the charts in addition to his other abilities such as flight and super speed as he’d just witnessed. From the strain of the man’s muscles and the grimace on his expression, he could tell the other man wasn’t holding back. He also noted that, for all his brute strength, Superman apparently had very little hand to hand combat training. The woman, however, did and she was wiping the floor with him as a result. Just as that thought crossed his mind, she shifted her hip and turned. Superman fell forward, momentarily off-balance, but before he could regain his footing she tossed him into the far wall like he was nothing more than a ragdoll.
His eyes swept the area as the two titans continued to battle then caught sight of the bent and twisted metal door leading to some kind of vault. Deciding quickly that he would be of no use in a fight between two god-like beings, he slipped into the room quietly. The first thing he noted was that several rows of metal shelving had been knocked down and the floor was littered with the contents of several metal containment lockers that had been completely torn from their hinges.

“I’m seeing internal surveillance cameras,” he said over the din, “Can you hack them and upload whatever’s on there?”

//Working on that now but Luthor has that footage stored on a server separate from their in-house security system which is apparently why I couldn’t find it before.//

At that moment, Superman and the woman he was fighting came crashing through the entrance to the vault. He let loose with a hard left hook that sent her careening through the air and crashing all the way through the many layers of reinforced steel, soundproofing, cinderblocks, and brick, and onto the street below.

Batman began to head towards the opening in the wall to see where the body landed only to jerk back and duck as a thin metallic rope whipped outwards and entangled around Superman’s neck, jerking him forward. The female super-soldier reappeared, apparently none the worse for wear, one hand pulling her back through the breech and the other clutching at the golden cord. He fell to his knees, his hands clutching at the ligature around his throat, but couldn’t seem to be able to break its hold.

Batman immediately unleashed several razor sharp batarangs; two bouncing off the cord harmlessly while the other three were deflected by a pair of metal gauntlets the woman wore on her forearms. Without releasing the line around the other man’s neck, she lifted a heavy steel safe with one hand and hurled it in his direction as if it weighed nothing. He rolled and took cover behind the door of the vault that had been ripped from its hinges. He quickly tossed several gas vials towards her that shattered at her feet sending up a cloud of stun gas that was strong enough to take down an elephant.

The woman staggered backwards, releasing her hold on the rope long enough for Superman to take in a gasp of air. She never fell however, instead she shook her head and focused her gaze at him. She picked up the end of the cord and gave it a mighty jerk just as Superman staggered to his feet, The other man flew at him like a toy at the end of a string and Batman barely had time to get out of his way before he landed hard near where he had been crouching.

He reached into his utility belt and pulled out a small sonic device similar to the ones often employed by the League and tossed it at her feet. As soon as it landed near her boot, the device sent out a high pitched sonic wave that caused the glass within the room and the office outside of the vault to shatter. The woman and Superman both cried out, clutching their ears, and he had only seconds to form a
game plan to take her down.

He went to Superman and loosened the thin rope from his neck. As soon as he was clear, his strength seemed to return and he launched himself at the woman. She lifted her foot and shattered the device under her heel, silencing the high pitched whine but it had already done its job. She lifted her head just as Superman was on top of her. He hit her hard, sending her sailing back out of the large fissure in the wall and onto the street below.

He stalked towards the opening to finish this once and for all, his expression intent as he kicked away the debris under his feet. One of the metal fireboxes damaged in the melee sprang open and several small green rock fragments spilled out. All of the sudden, for no reason that Batman could discern, Superman staggered and fell to his knees as if in pain. He clutched at his head and toppled over, his expression strained as he let out a low moan.

Batman glanced out of the opening onto the street. The soldier pulled herself from the wreckage of the car she’d landed on and stared up at him. For a second it looked as though she was going to come back to finish the fight but a black tactical van pulled up beside her and she got inside before they pulled away and headed into traffic.

“Watchtower, get me the license plates of that van and all the traffic cam footage. I want to know who those people are and where they’re headed.”

//On it. Are you both okay?//

“I’m fine but I don’t know about him yet.” He walked over to Superman to check on his injuries but stopped as he heard a familiar voice from the entrance to the vault.

“Oh well, it was time to redecorate anyway.”

“Luthor,” he greeted in a low gravel.

“Batman,” he returned. Lex stepped inside, his eyes sweeping over the damage as he brushed some imaginary dust from his impeccably pressed suit. He turned to the two men with a dispassionate air, “Well, just in case no one else has said it yet, welcome to Metropolis.”
Felicity and Laurel entered Orbital and were immediately greeted by Wildcat who gave them both a nod.

“Is Miranda here yet?” She asked quietly.

“Hello Felicity,” she heard the woman in question call out and she turned in her direction.

“Miranda.” Her eyes swept over the other woman’s lush figure, taking a moment to admire her impeccable fashion sense. She was in head to toe Oscar de la Renta. She knew the outfit since he was one of her favorite designers, although she doubted she could pull off the deceptively simple looking white blouse and black pencil skirt nearly as well as Miranda did. The blouse with the cut sleeves held together with tiny black bows played up her generous bosom while the pencil skirt emphasized her curves. Even the dainty lady-like heels with the same small bows across her instep made her legs seem longer, curvier. Her dark hair fell in a tumble down her back and her makeup was so flawless she almost looked like a modern masterpiece brought to life.

Felicity, on the other hand, had opted for comfort. Oh, she still looked fairly professional in the short Dolce and Gabbana stretchy red tweed skirt and soft cardigan, but she didn’t look like that. While most of the bruising had faded from her face she’d reopened the cut on her lip so she was forced to again eschew lipstick in favor of a simple gloss and kept her makeup light. When she left the house she thought she looked pretty good even without it, but suddenly she felt all washed out and schlumpy. She’d even opted for flats, leaving the tweedy looking heels she was planning to wear in the closet and going with a pair of Charlotte Olympia cream and black panda flats instead. At the time she was thinking ‘mission wear’ not ‘dress to impress’. She knew she didn’t look bad, just…‘cute’.

And short.

And, yeah, washed out and schlumpy.

Once again she was struck by the odd thought that while men went to war in fatigues and combat boots, women often engaged in subtler and even more deadly forms of battle every single day in heels and designer wear.

“What adorable shoes,” Miranda said looked down at her feet. “And so comfortable looking; are those supposed to be puppies?”
“Pandas,” Fly like a bird of prey, Felicity reminded herself as she looked at the cunning calculation in the other woman’s expression as she took in her appearance as well. She could almost hear Sara whisper in her ear, ‘Just suck it up and own it, little bird. Let her underestimate you because that’s when we do our best work.’

“Cute,” the other woman said with a charming smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Shall we?”

“Of course,” she said, straightening her posture along with her glasses as she followed her into Cyber Ops.

In addition to Miranda and herself, she recognized the three techs on duty as Alice, the young woman she’d met the night before, Mordred the cyber-goth, and ‘Dave’ the very preppy looking techie who looked like he just stepped out of an Abercrombie ad. Truth be told, of all three Mordred was the one she felt most comfortable around even though they had yet to have an actual conversation. Even with his colorful new school tats, Mad Hatter graphic tee, and spiked hair, he seemed the most approachable if only because she knew for a fact that he was a genuine hacker. Dave’s slick, put together way of dressing and ultra-bright white smile instantly put her on edge for some reason while Alice…

…she didn’t know what to think about Alice actually. Like with Gypsy, there was this instant sort of recognition between herself and the younger woman. While Dave definitely pinged her radar hard, the second she came close to Alice a hum or buzz began to pull at the edge of her hearing. Alice seemed to sense it as well because the minute she stepped into the room, her spine stiffened and she turned to face her with a curious expression. Their eyes met and it was as though something began to push at the edges of her mind. It wasn’t a painful feeling, more like a heaviness, as if the air pressure had dropped and gravity became more dense around them.

Felicity frowned and pressed her fingers against her forehead as though warding off a headache which she probably was. She hadn’t slept well, that was all, she reasoned. Steeling herself for what lay ahead, she found her center and pushed the feeling away. Alice shifted uncomfortably in her chair and frowned as well, shaking her head slightly.

“You okay, Allie?” Mordred asked, turning to her with a frown.

“I’m fine,” she said in a soft voice offering him a smile. “Too much caffeine.”

“No such thing for a hacker,” he said absently as he tapped on his keyboard and watched the
monitors in front of them.

“I guess I’m not much of a hacker then,” she told him as she typed some commands in as well.

Dave shot them both a quelling glare that caused Alice to straighten her posture while Mordred simply ignored him. “Everything’s ready, Ms. Tate.”

“Very well,” she said stepping closer. She turned in her direction, “Felicity?”

For a second she blanked out and then she realized that Miranda was handing the mission over to her. Swallowing down her nervousness she put on her game face, “Open up a coms channel,” she ordered, stepping up behind Mordred who was at the center console.

//Hey Cutie.//

“Hey Canary,” she said, unable to prevent her lips from curving upwards. “What are we looking at on the ground?”

//It’s a party, wish you were here. Or not,// she said absently. Although her tone was light and teasing, there was an edge of something that put her instantly on alert. //It appears that we have a few gatecrashers.//

“League or ARGUS?” She asked.

//Both.//

//This was some kind of fucked up intel, by the way,// Helena said, her voice joining Sara’s over the speakers. //If we’d gone in using the bullshit Isabel handed us, we would have been stuck in the middle of a goddamn bloodbath.//

//She’s not wrong,// Tatsu chimed in. //ARGUS and the League are engaged and we’re staying back at a safe distance at the moment.//
“Pull up the satellite images,” Miranda ordered. “Has Lady Blackhawk deployed the drone?”

//Deploying now.// Lyla told them. //Going live.//

The large screens came to life, half of them showing the sat feeds and the other half broadcasting live images from a small drone camera. The drone came up behind the stone structure on the edge of the cliff, the steady camerawork a testament to her skills as a pilot even if it was from behind the controller of an unmanned mini-drone.

It was hard to see much, the area bathed in darkness as it was the middle of the night, but then Lyla switched the feed to night vision and suddenly they could see just how complicated things had gotten. At least two dozen League assassins dressed in black were scaling the sheer rock face of the cliff while several others who had already made the journey were engaged in battle with ARGUS operatives.

Helena was right; had they gone in, it would have been a turkey shoot with all three groups battling to the last.

“Do you have eyes on Creote and Savant?” Miranda asked coolly.

//Seriously?// Helena shot back with a snort.

//Uh, that would be a negative.// Sara said roundly. //Right now they’re holed up in their quaint little cottage roasting weenies over the fire as they watch the slaughter going on in their front yard.//

At that moment there was the sound of an explosion and the screen lit up in front of them.

“What’s going on?” Felicity asked quickly.

//That would be the landmines.// Sara said wryly. //Apparently Savant’s nursemaid has gotten into gardening.//

//Yeah, he’s trying to plant an EOD tree.// Lyla said sarcastically. //Actually, make that a forest.//
“Are you shitting me?” Helena burst out. “Lady, if you want these ‘packages’ so badly then--!”

Miranda reached across the console and muted the coms before turning towards her, “That’s your team down there; I expect you to make this happen, understood?”

From the back of the room she caught the expression on Laurel’s face as she started towards Miranda before Wildcat put a hand on her shoulder and leaned in to whisper something in her ear. Felicity pushed down her own irritation and looked at her boss with a jaundiced eye, “First off, you’re absolutely right; that’s my team down there and I won’t send them into a blood bath. If they say they can’t do it, I’m pulling them out; period.”

“We cannot allow ARGUS or the League to get hold of Savant,” Miranda said tersely. “That means they either need to bring them in or take them out; one or the other. Now can you or can you not do the job you were hired to do?”

For one brief moment Felicity seriously considered unleashing her inner Helena and punching the bitch’s lights out. Miranda had gone from charming and intelligent to living up to her handle as a primordial monster in no time flat.

Fuck this, Felicity thought. However, before she quit she needed to get her team home where they belonged. “Turn the coms back on.”

“Lyla,” she broke in, “What’s the model of that drone?”
“That’s one of WayneTech’s subsidiaries,” she muttered to herself. “On the back of the controller there should be a set of numbers and letters; read them off for me.”

She tapped Mordred on the shoulder and motioned for him to get up. As soon as he abandoned his seat she sat down and pulled up the schematics for the drone. “Okay Lyla, that drone has on-board GPS and SALH laser tracking along with IMU, SDR, MIMO, and MFGPR.”

“Uh, Slick, I know where you’re going with this and there is no way in hell it’s going to work,” the other woman told her.

“It’ll work,” she told her. “MIT was experimenting with Quantum drones for landmine detection back in ’96.”

“Yeah, by using an air knife to set them off, not to detect, and this is a micro-drone; do you know how close to the ground you’d have to be for that ground penetrating radar to be even remotely effective?”

“About a meter, give or take,” she answered as she continued to check out what was going on using the drone’s night vision remotely. “Okay, I have control of the drone.”

“Fe—Starling,” Lyla said with a hint of annoyance, “First off, the second ARGUS or the League catches sight of that thing they’re going to blow it out of the sky. Second, you have probably a fifty percent chance of that even working in the first place!”

“More like seventy-five, eighty,” she told her.

“Yeah, those might be good odds for Vegas but we’re talking *landmines* here. That means even if we can figure out a way through all those bullets, grenades, and ninjas, we still have a twenty to twenty-five percent chance of getting blown all to hell and back!”
“You know, you didn’t used to be this pessimistic,” she muttered. “You used to like my plans.”

//Yeah, when they involved tequila and Chippendales dancers, not landmines!//

//I’m kind of with Lady Blackhawk on this one, Little Bird.// Sara told her.

“I thought you liked it when my plans involved blowing shit up,” she told her as she hacked into the drone’s computer and tweaked the programming a little.

//Not when I was the one getting blown up,// she told her.

She ignored her, “Gypsy, are you live?”

//I’m here.// She answered.

Felicity quickly pulled up her file just for reference, “Okay, here’s the plan; I need you to cloak that drone and I’m going to paint the targets using the bistatic continuous-wave radar. This should light up the landmines so you guys can see them using your night vision specs.”

//Yeah, but we’re really far away…// she told her. //I need to be in close range to cloak and there’s no way we’re getting anywhere near there.//

“Here comes the tricky part; I’m going to have to have you guys split up and get Gypsy as close to the target as possible,” she motioned for Mordred to move down a seat and take the other workstation directly beside her. “Canary and Katana, I need both of you to take out the assassins on the cliff. Blackhawk, you deploy the secondary drone while Huntress, I need you to head into the tree line then work on taking out as many unfriendlies as you can. Provide a distraction, do whatever it takes, but I want everybody headed toward you guys and away from Gypsy. Meanwhile Gypsy, I need you to cloak yourself and head for the cottage. Don’t breech the perimeter until I give the go signal then trail behind the drone slowly.”

//Are you for real?// Helena asked. //You want us to take on two armies by ourselves?//
“Canary and Katana have the hard part. ARGUS agents are well trained but they aren’t League trained. Besides, I thought you said you were a badass bird of prey; I figured you’d jump at the chance to swoop down and take out a few of Amanda Waller’s rats all by your lonesome. Or is this a job for us songbirds instead?”

//That’s true,// Sara broke in and she could practically see her pirate’s smile. //Tell you what, Huntress; you just keep the seat warm on the transpo and as soon as I take out these dozen or so assassins, I’ll head on over and take out Waller’s crew, too.//

//You’re both full of shit,// she said gruffly. //Okay, Tweety; you’re on! I’ll bet you I can take out more of these jokers than you can. Hell, I’ll even spot you the first five.//

Sara snorted derisively, //No need to spot me anything, sweetheart. I don’t need to do the girl push-ups, I can handle the full monty just fine and then some. Trained League assassin, remember?//

//I’ll see your League assassin bullshit and raise you six martial arts masters, two ex-special forces firearm instructors, and more mobbed up ‘uncles’ than I can count!//

//Care to put your money where your mouth is?//

//Shit’s getting real now,// Lyla broke in.

“Let ‘em know I got fifty on the blonde,” Wildcat said from the back of the room.

//I heard that, old man,// Helena said darkly.

“I don’t know, this kind of thing is pretty much Helena’s wheelhouse,” Laurel offered up.

//Excuse me? What ever happened to family loyalty?// Sara huffed.

//Burn!/// Helena cackled.

//I hate to say it but I’m kind of with Huntress, too,// Gypsy said reluctantly.
//Thank you for that,// Sara said wryly.

//I’m in,// Lyla said. //Put me down for Canary...even though, as the only ‘hawk’ on the team, I really like the ‘birds of prey’ thing. You know, we should make that our unofficial team name kind of like ‘Team Arrow’ only we could be The Birds of Prey.//

//The Birds of Prey does sound kind of bad ass,// Gypsy admitted.

“It really does,” Laurel said to Wildcat who chuckled.

He stepped closer with a ribald twinkle in his eye, “Hear that, blondie; maybe when you get home I could be the cat who ate the Canary then spent the rest of the night in the Cat-Bird Seat?”

//You couldn’t handle me, Pops,// she told him.

//Put me down for Canary as well,// Katana said smoothly. //Normally I don’t gamble but us trained assassins have to stick together.//

//Nice,// Sara said cheerfully.

//Whatever,// Helena shot back, obviously unimpressed. //By the way, you can only count the guys you take out, not the ones you and the whispering samurai take out together.//

//You’re on.//

“Tell you what, I’ll make this simple; Laurel and I are planning a belated Thanksgiving later when you guys get home. Winner gets to eat, drink, and be merry and loser does the dishes,” Felicity told them. “I’ll even throw in a half gallon of my own private stash to sweeten the pot; we’re talking Ben and Jerry’s finest.”

//Sounds good to me,// Sara said confidently.
“Me too, and I can tell you right now, I’m not doing any dishes; consider me down.”

“Alright then, let’s get this show on the road.”

Batman moved towards the fallen man slowly, never taking his eyes off Luthor, “Are you alright?”

“No,” he gasped as he attempted to leverage himself onto his knees only to collapse in a heap. “What’s happening to me?”

“I think your friend might need a doctor,” Luther said, glancing over at the fallen man with a malicious gleam. “It would appear that the young lady who broke into my vault may have done some damage to more than just my private property.”

“Mallory is dead,” Batman said, pinning Luthor with a hard look. “He was murdered, probably by the same woman who broke into your office.”

“Was he? What a shame,” the other man said sounding almost bored. “Although I doubt it was the same woman who was responsible for all this.”

“And how do you know that?” He asked in a low growl.

“The same way I knew my office and private collections vault had been broken into,” he said smoothly. “I was alerted immediately to the breech and was able to access the video footage. Even with her disguise, it’s obvious that the woman seen leaving his office had little resemblance to the woman who broke into mine.”

“You said you didn’t know Mallory had been murdered; why were you checking the feeds outside his office?” Batman pointed out, one eye still on the man who lay panting at his feet although he made no move to help either.

“Given recent events, I’ve made it a policy to always keep an eye on Mr. Mallory,” he said wryly. “If, as you say, Mr. Mallory was murdered it wasn’t by the woman who broke in here, although
“that’s not to say the two crimes weren’t connected.”

“Meaning?”

“Nothing,” he frowned reaching down to pick up a large pearl then examined it carefully, “It’s merely conjecture on my part but it stands to reason that whoever killed Sebastien and broke into my vault wasn’t after money or any type of financial reward.” He held up the object in his hand, “Do you see this?”

“It’s a cultured pearl,” he said evenly, barely sparing it a glance.

“No, it’s not,” Luthor said, tossing it up and catching it like a baseball. “It’s a saltwater pearl.” He looked at him and smirked, “Well, from the look on your face I’d say you don’t believe me, but it’s true.” He looked down at the still struggling Superman, “In case you’re having trouble following along unlike your sophisticated friend here, this,” he held it up by his fingertips, “is perhaps the largest saltwater pearl ever discovered. While large freshwater pearls, such as the Pearl of Allah, are rare, saltwater pearls of this size are unprecedented. The largest saltwater pearl on record was around sixty carats. This is nearly eight hundred; a perfectly round, flawless pearl that was discovered nearly a hundred and fifty years ago and held in a private collection by a man who claimed to have escaped the mythical city of Atlantis.”

“Atlantis?” Batman said neutrally.

He nodded, “A sailor by the name of Arthur Curry was lost at sea when his fishing vessel was caught in a storm. He claimed he drowned but was saved by a mermaid who did something to him that allowed him to breathe underwater. She took him to Atlantis where he fell in love with this woman whom he claimed was the daughter of the King of Poseidonis, the capital city of ‘Atlan’. For one reason or the other, the king decided to kill him and he escaped, but not before taking a bag of jewels with him including this pearl.”

“Nice fairy tale. You should write that down; you could become the next JK Rowling. The kids would love it,” he deadpanned.

“It does sound rather farfetched, but collecting rare objects as well as the stories that go with them is a bit of a hobby of mine,” he told him. “I’m something of an amateur geologist and this vault holds my private collection of various bits and bobs I’ve collected throughout the years; some priceless, like the Pearl of Orin,” he tossed the creamy gem up in the air once again, “and some worthless to anyone except myself. Those green meteor fragments at your friend’s feet, for example,” he said looking pointedly at the faintly glowing small stones that were scattered around a weak and moaning
Superman. “While all meteorite is intrinsically valuable, those particular ones are merely a curiosity a friend of mine sent to me from Antarctica. While I’ll have to do a complete inventory though, nothing appears to be missing. Damaged, yes, but most thieves would have gone for the diamonds or the large ruby over by your foot.” Batman looked down at the robin’s egg sized stone at his feet. “Instead they tore through this place and tossed them aside like they were worthless.”

Batman glanced down at the fallen man and, despite himself, began to grow concerned. He wasn’t recovering, in fact he appeared to be getting worse. He was beginning to break into a cold sweat and his face had gone deathly pale.

Forcing himself not to acknowledge the man struggling at his feet, he again addressed Luthor, “So what were they after?”

“No idea,” he said with a hint of smug satisfaction that told him he knew exactly what is was they were after. “However, if you want to know who’s responsible then I suggest you try sticking closer to home.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that you should be more careful with who you allow to take up residence in your city,” he said enigmatically. His cellphone buzzed and he withdrew it from the inner pocket of his jacket, “It appears the elevators are back up and running so the police will be up here momentarily. I suggest you find your friend, Superman, a doctor.” He gave the man in question a look of mock sympathy. Superman said nothing, merely glared at him through gritted teeth, his arms trembling as he finally managed to get himself off the floor then onto his feet. “Are you sure you’re alright? I can call you an ambulance although I doubt they’d be able to do much for someone of your…unique origins.”

“No, thank you,” he wheezed breathlessly, stumbling slightly.

“Suit yourself,” he shrugged. He turned to leave then glanced back at Batman, “When you do catch up to our mutual friend, make sure to give her my regards and let her know that I expect to be compensated for the damages.”

“Our mutual friend?” Batman repeated, the words setting his teeth on edge.

Again, Luthor smiled enigmatically as if he knew exactly why it was those words were affecting him, “Hmm, and tell her to save a dance for me at the Gala, I so look forward to seeing her again.
Oh, and Superman?” He said with an innocent expression, “Feel free to keep a few of the meteor fragments. According to my friend who discovered them, they originate from somewhere in the Corvus system near where Lois Lane said you were from. I was actually toying with the idea of calling it ‘Kryptonite’ as a homage to yourself. You know, to thank you for all the good you’ve done since coming to Metropolis.” He turned on his heel and waved at them dismissively over his shoulder, “Do show yourselves out, gentleman.”

Everything in him screamed to go after Luthor and pound him into a bloody pulp until he gave up the answers he needed. Unfortunately, Superman again collapsed to his knees with a low moan and he realized that he needed to get both of them out of there.

“Can you fly?” He asked, even though he knew it was unlikely given he couldn’t even stand.

He shook his head, sweat dripping off his brow onto the floor, “No…” he gasped, “I don’t know what’s happening to me. It feels like…I don’t know.”

He reached down and helped the other man up, grunting as he took on his weight. He was a heavy son of a bitch but luckily he could still handle him. They stumbled towards the opening in the wall and he unleashed the grappling line and pulled, making sure it was a secure connection. He leaned down and picked the other man up in a fireman’s lift, faltering slightly under his dead weight, before pushing off and swinging over to the next rooftop and into the night.

“Are you in position?” Felicity asked.

//Almost,// Gypsy said.

“Canary, I’m seeing two bogies coming up on your six,” Mordred said as he monitored her position from the second drone cam Lyla deployed.

//Got it.,// she said, followed by the sound of flesh slapping against flesh.

The sound of automatic gunfire erupted through the speakers and the infra-red on the sat images lit up
“Huntress, what’s your status?” Alice asked.

//Everything’s copasetic,// she said then grunted. //That makes six for me so far.//

//You are way behind the ball there, Nutsy,// Sara said as someone cried out over coms. //I’m up to
ten already, not including the ones Katana took out.//

//Night’s still young, Tweety.// There was the sound of more punches and the twang of a crossbow,
//Make that nine. I’m hard on your tail.//

//Get used to that position,// Canary told her as the unmistakable sound of a bo staff hitting body
armor came through the speakers. //Eleven. Oh, and hope you don’t mind but I ran out of assassins
so now I’m taking out your guys, too.//

There was a flurry of movement and Huntress’s crossbow sounded three times in rapid succession,
//Fair enough since I just took out three of these League pussies you apparently missed. Twelve and,
by the way, I didn’t even have to break a sweat.//

//I’m starting to think--// Katana grunted and there was the sound of a male voice crying out in pain,
//--we should do this betting thing more often. It seems to be a fairly effective--// There was another
scream,//--motivational tool in the field.//

There was the sound of automatic gunfire, //Yeah, maybe we should make a few side wagers; make
the loser do the windows as well as the dishes.// The report of the machine pistol erupted from the
speakers once again as Lyla spoke, //I fucking hate to do windows. Hey Slick?//

“What’s going on?” Felicity asked.

//Not much,// Lyla told her before the line erupted in more gunfire, //It’s just that I’m a little bit
pinned down right now by a bunch of these ARGUS assholes so you’re going to have to pilot both
the drones remotely.//

//You shouldn’t call them that,// Sara said panting as she continued to battle along the south side of
the perimeter opposite from her position, //It wasn’t too long ago that you were one of those ARGUS
assholes, remember?/

//How could I forget?// Lyla said, unleashing another volley of bullets. //Working with Amanda was both a joy and a privilege,// she said sarcastically.

//Is it just me, or is that Deadshot guy kind of cute in a scruffy pirate kind of way?// Helena asked harshly followed by the whoosh of air being displaced by her bolts, //Fifteen.//

//Sixteen,// Sara said, //And because of that I just lost all respect for you, not that I had a whole lot before now.//

“I’ve got the secondary drone,” Alice said quietly from beside her.

Felicity nodded, “Katana, Blackhawk; are you still with us?”

//We’re good!/ Lyla told her. //Now that Katana’s here it’s practically a cakewalk.//

//There are a lot of them though,// Katana told her. //Far more than you’d expect to see with a surgical strike team.//

//She’s right,// Lyla said, firing her weapon again followed by the metallic clack-clack of her reloading the clip, //They came prepared for a battle which means they knew something we didn’t, like the fact that the League was going to be here.//

//Actually, it’s worse than that. Blackhawk, Katana; you seeing what I’m seeing?// Sara asked.

“We need to keep the coms channels clear of idle chit chat, ladies,” Dave said from his place beside Mordred. Felicity threw him a dangerous look and he wilted slightly under her stern gaze.

“What’s going on?” Felicity asked, turning to Mordred.

//Shit,// Lyla cursed.
He focused the sat cam onto their position, “I’m seeing heat signatures at the rally point.”

//Meaning they’ve got our transpo surrounded; we’ve got nowhere to go but forward now.// Lyla said roughly.

//Are you flanked?// Sara asked tersely.

//Not yet, but we will be soon.//

“Huntress, cover Gypsy. Canary, can you secure the extraction point alone?” Felicity asked.

//She’s gonna have to.// Lyla said, //Right now Katana and I are in defilade. If it wasn’t for these rocks we’d be toast.// They heard the sounds of bullets pinging across the cover in question.

//I’ve got it.// Sara said confidently. //As soon as I take out the guys surrounding the Zinda, I’ll be back to help you guys out. How many am I looking at?//

“I’m seeing four, no five heat signatures,” Mordred told her.

//Copy. Hear that, Huntress? Better get ready for dishpan hands ‘cause I’m gonna be ruining my figure with ice cream.//

//I’ve never washed a dish in my life and I’m not starting now.// the other woman shot back. //Eighteen.//

// Like, not even in the dishwasher? How do you go through life without ever washing dishes?// Gypsy asked quietly.

//That’s ‘cause she’s--// there was a grunt and the sounds of more punches, //a former rich girl Mafia Princess, emphasis on ‘princess’.// Sara told her. //Seventeen.//
“I would just like to point out that I technically come from even more money than Huntress does and I have washed plenty of dishes,” Felicity said off-handedly as she continued to monitor the action.

//She also makes a mean Red Headed Slut// Sara added.

The three techs beside her all turned in her direction.

“It’s a drink,” she told them. “Speaking of which, if you can get through this with all your parts attached, I’ll treat the whole team to a round of slutty Jägermeister shots at a girl bar I found the other day.”

//Goddamn, that sounds good// Lyla breathed as she continued to discharge her weapon. //I haven’t had one of those since the Great Tequila Debacle when Thea was behind the bar and she got Roy to put on lipstick and a pair of heels.//

//I still have that picture on my phone// Sara said. //I’m just waiting to use it for leverage the next time I need somebody to detail my car.//

“You bring the warm bodies and I’ll provide the hangover cure afterwards. Huntress are you in position?”

//I got the kid// she answered.

She glanced up at the screen, checking the heat signatures on their location since the second drone was being tasked over the jet, “Okay, here’s the plan; Gypsy, I need you to cloak the drone, Huntress, and yourself, then go slow. I’m going to be flying this thing remotely and I need to keep it less than a meter off the ground for it to be effective. Be careful and watch your footing because the target will only light up for a couple of seconds. I need you to take point and lead Huntress through the minefield since she’s going to be too busy covering your back to pay attention.”

//Fucking great// Helena muttered.

“Stay back a minimum of twelve feet and, even then, shrapnel is a better than even concern if this thing goes off but any more than that and you might get lost in the weeds.” Her brow furrowed in thought, “Can you use your abilities to ‘mark’ the placement of the mines as you pass as well as cloak yourselves?”
//I—I don’t know.// she said uncertainly. //I’ve never actually done anything like this before.//

//Shit.// Helena cursed, //I’m about to get my ass blown all to hell and back, aren’t I? I’m telling you right now, if this chick doesn’t manage to get me killed, I want hazard pay. A lot of it.//

//Stop whining! Like you don’t almost get yourself blown up every other day.// Sara scoffed.

//Yeah, but that’s just for fun. This shit here isn’t fun!//

//She has a point.// Lyla said reluctantly.

Felicity shut her eyes and concentrated, “Listen to me; just focus on my voice. Don’t worry about the League or ARGUS, or even your objective; let Huntress worry about that. All I want you to worry about is shielding yourselves and marking the landmines so you can get out of there with the packages.”

//Got it.// Gypsy said, the uncertainty fading from her tone.

Alice glanced over to her with a curious expression but she ignored her, instead keeping her mind centered around Gypsy. For once she had three other techs to handle the others so she could focus her attention entirely on just one member of her team. “Listen to my voice, I’ll walk you through it; do you trust me?”

//Yes.//

“Good.” She activated the drone and put her hand on the toggle. The camera went live and she began her scan, “Hang back until I tell you to move.” One of the landmines lit up, “On your two o’clock, see it?”

//Got it.// Gypsy said and the air above the mine began to shimmer.

“Now move but go slow,” she said, continuing to sweep the area. “To your left.” Again the air
began to shimmer. “Slow, slow, now stop. There’s a mine right ahead of you. Step over it carefully since he decided to be clever and plant a few of them on either side as well.”

//I see it.//

//This is bullshit,// Helena muttered followed by two more sounds of air being displaced and the snapping of the crossbow mechanism. //Twenty.//

//You’re still behind by five,// Sara told her. //I finished with mine and now I’m off to find a few more.//

//They’re starting to thin out but we caught one of the men sending out the call for reinforcements,// Katana warned. //We need to get out as soon as possible.//

//We’re at the door,// Gypsy said, heaving a sigh of relief.

//Yeah, now for the really easy part like taking down a fucking Russian mountain,// Helena said sarcastically.

“Mordred, check for heat signatures in the building,” she ordered.

The man next to her offered her a pleased grin at her use of his preferred handle then got back down to business, “I’ve got two hot spots on the first floor.”

“Stop!”

//Why? What’s up?// Gypsy said in confusion.

Something was tickling at her consciousness and she turned her head slightly at the flash of green at the edge of her vision. She blinked and looked at Alice who appeared not to have even noticed her moment of discomfiture, “Uh, Creote is ex-Spetsnaz so chances are he booby-trapped the door. Huntress, check for tripwires while Gypsy, use the LDS gun in your pack to scan it. And, just a suggestion, stay off the welcome mat. This guy is really fond of explosives.”
There was a popping sound and the camera on the secondary drone went dead followed shortly by the one she had been piloting near the cottage.

“What’s going on?” She asked, looking up at the darkened screens.

“I’m seeing movement and gunfire,” Mordred said from beside her as he watched the sat feeds that were a few seconds behind real time.

//Some stragglers took out the drone but we got them.// Lyla told her.

//Us, too.// Helena said darkly.

“Is everybody okay?”

//They’re fine.// Sara said brightly. //Luckily for them I just happened to be in the neighborhood.//

//Yeah. Lucky.// Huntress said dubiously.

//We’re going to breach now.// Sara told her.

“Okay, Gypsy; let Huntress and Canary do the fighting, I want you to concentrate on maintaining the illusions in the minefield and dealing with keeping Creote distracted. Try and cloak yourselves as best you can; hopefully he can’t hit what he can’t see, but your first priority is to maintain focus on the mines. None of this counts if you can’t get back out of there safely.”

//C—py--// And then there was a loud buzzing noise as the coms cut out.

“What’s going on?” Felicity asked, typing in a command to see if she couldn’t bring the coms back on.

//N—t sure.// she heard Lyla say over the heavy static. //Th-- *bzzt* --ind of s-gnal jammer.//
Mordred quickly expanded the sat images so they could see what was going on, “I’ve got five heat signatures in the compound—wait, make that three.” He said and they watched as two of the red figures suddenly disappeared off screen while the three others moved out towards the rally point.

“What’s happening?” Miranda asked, stepping forward while Wildcat and Laurel, both of whom had been pretty much silent the entire time, stepped closer as well.

Felicity felt the first flickers of panic curl in her stomach, “I need a status report, over.”

“Canary? Answer me; what is your status, over?”

For a few seconds her heart stopped and then Sara’s voice came over the line, //We’re okay.//

Felicity took a deep breath, “You scared the crap out of me.”

//Sorry Cutie-Patootie, but one of those ARGUS asshats set up a jammer on the perimeter.//

Miranda stepped forward, “Do you have Creote and Savant?”

//No.//

“Why not?” She asked tersely.

//They weren’t there.//

“What do you mean they weren’t there?” She demanded.
"She means they weren’t there," Huntress answered for her, "Sorry lady, but your intel was for shit."

“There were two heat signatures,” Miranda said slowly, her dark eyes flashing angrily.

"Free standing electric heaters," Sara cut in smoothly, "set up to fool the infra-red. Savant might be looney tunes but he’s not stupid."

“So all of this was for nothing?” Mordred muttered from beside her with a scowl.

“Apparently,” Felicity murmured. “Any casualties?”

"Some cuts and bruises only," Katana told her. "We’re heading to the extraction point now to get out of here before more ARGUS reinforcements show up."

“Negative, Katana,” Dave said from the other side of Mordred. “You still have an assignment to track down--”

“Get to the transport and come home,” Felicity told them sending ‘Dave’ another warning look.

"That’s the plan, babe," Sara told her. "Be home in a little while."

“Be safe,” she told them before the coms went dark.

“Why did you stop them from completing their original objective?” Miranda asked her. She didn’t appear angry, merely irritated.

Felicity spun around in her chair and gave the other woman a steady look, “Creote and Savant weren’t there.”

“They were,” she told her.
“At some point, yes,” Felicity agreed, “However, to find them they’d have to do a full perimeter search and that’s assuming they didn’t evacuate hours ago. It’s obvious that they knew they were about to be attacked and they had time to prepare for it. Also, if my people say the risk isn’t worth the reward or they feel it’s time to abort, we abort. I won’t risk their safety unnecessarily.”

“Risking their safety is what they get paid to do,” Miranda said coolly.

“Well, throwing people’s lives away for nothing isn’t what I signed up for, sorry,” she said calmly. “If you disagree then feel free to fire me.”

The control room went silent once again as both Wildcat and Laurel surreptitiously took up defensive positions just in case another battalion of Amazons showed up. Meanwhile, both Mordred and Alice glanced at her before turning their chairs towards the other woman as well as if to demonstrate their support. The only person in the room not looking at her with approval (besides Miranda) was Dave. He was busy giving Miranda heart-eyes while occasionally giving her a go-to-hell glare.

She decided she really didn’t like Dave.

“I hired you because of your experience in handling a team and you did that,” Miranda said after a pause. “I may not like the results but I chose you to act as director for a reason and tonight you proved that.”

Dave shot her an incredulous look then glared at Felicity again which she ignored.

“Thank you,” she said instead.

Dave’s screen lit up, “Um, Ms. Tate, there’s an incoming call from Ms. Rochev; shall I transfer it to your office?”

“It’s the Director’s office, not mine, but yes,” she said, chastising him lightly and causing the younger man to look even more disgruntled than he had before. “Good job everyone,” Miranda said, glancing around the room with a slightly stiff smile. She turned to Felicity, “I believe we agreed to a private meeting after the mission; if you’d care to follow me to your office after you’re done out here?”
“Certainly,” she said smoothly. “Alice, continue monitoring the channels in case the team runs into any problems and, Mordred, keep sweeping the area; if Creote and Savant are there I want to know where.”

“And what about me, Director?” ‘Dave’ asked stiffly.

“Take five, Dave,” she told him with a dirty look.

“Yes ma’am,” he said with a touch more respect than before.

She gave both Wildcat and Laurel a reassuring nod as she moved past them to ‘her’ office for what she suspected was about to be a formal dress down. When she got to the door she was surprised to note that, unlike Isabel would have done, Miranda chose not to take the power position behind the desk. Instead she sat in the same comfortable chair she had at their first meeting as she spoke on the phone.

“Well, that’s unfortunate,” she said to the person on the other end of the line. Her mouth was turned down in an unhappy expression, “No, no just come home after you tie up the loose ends there and we’ll regroup. See you then,” she said ending the call and setting the phone down on the low table in front of her. “Please sit,” she invited.

Felicity shut the door behind her before slowly heading to the couch opposite to her then waited.

“We’re not HIVE nor were we responsible for Lois Lane’s breakdown.”

She looked at the other woman in mild surprise and frowned, “Okay.”

“That said, we do suspect someone else of being HIVE,” she added.

“Who?”

“Lex Luthor.”
“Okay…” she said again, only slower and with a great deal more confusion.

Miranda looked at her curiously, “Do you know what HIVE is?”

“A terrorist organization,” she offered.

She smirked, “No; HIVE was originally an alien invasion that merely appeared to be a terrorist organization.”

“Say what now?” Felicity said doing a double take.

She nodded, “They were a collective species with a hive mind, similar to bees which is why they referred to themselves as ‘HIVE’. They were also extremely short-lived like mayflies so their goal was to control the human race beginning with key members of the government and business leaders so they could eventually transfer their consciousness into human bodies and take over the planet.”

She glanced behind her for a second, half-expecting to see a camera crew or at least some kind of banner that said ‘April Fools’ even though it was February. She blinked, “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” she nodded, “Unfortunately, the process of transferring their hive mind into a human body proved lethal to most humans so they needed to ‘improve’ us first.”

“Improve us,” she repeated.

Again the other woman nodded slightly, “They had technology that allowed them to, not only temporarily control people’s minds, but also to transform our DNA. The plan was to send out a carrier wave originating from their mothership down to Earth which would then be dispersed on a mass scale and trigger a spontaneous metamorphosis in everyone with the right genetic profile. In other words, meta-humans.”

“How?” Felicity asked, even though she could guess where she was going with this.

“That’s where things get interesting,” she said with a slight smile as she leaned back in her chair. “Did you ever stop to wonder how it was Dr. Harrison Wells received so much political and
“I just figured he greased a few palms,” she said honestly. Something about Wells had always bothered her a bit so she’d always assumed he wasn’t as innocent as he claimed. However playing fast and loose with the politically corrupt and being the harbinger of an alien invasion are two very different things.

“Not quite,” she said dryly. “The aliens planned to use the particle accelerator to trigger the change, but it wasn’t entirely successful. The idea was to not only trigger the dormant metagene, but to leave those affected by it empty husks that could be immediately ‘occupied’ by members of their race. Unfortunately for them, but fortunately for us, Dr. Wells’ experiment overloaded and exploded before it could disperse the entire wave.”

“So…” Felicity began.

“So in that way the particle accelerator did cause the sudden appearance of uniquely enhanced men and women.”

“No, I got that…kind of. I was just going to ask how you found out about this?” She asked, pursing her lips.

“That’s an even more complicated story,” she told her. “It starts with the fact that when they sent the carrier wave that blew the accelerator, it bounced back and also overloaded their ship’s systems somehow causing it to break up in our atmosphere.”

Felicity scratched at her earlobe and furrowed her brow, “Not to, you know, um…” she stuttered and tilted her head slightly, “No, no, I’m…yeah. Okay. If, and I do mean *if*,” she began slowly, “that were true, don’t you think someone would notice that a big huge space ship blew up above Central City?”

“Not really as they had cloaking technology which allowed their ship to appear invisible, however,” she said, “after the explosion a few government and private agencies *did* notice and immediately set out to retrieve any wreckage that didn’t burn up in the atmosphere. Can you guess which ones?”

“ARGUS,” she said in resignation. Because when isn’t Amanda Waller in charge of her shitty day?
Especially since Moira and Slade were dead,

“Still,” Felicity added, “people would have noticed a bunch of space debris falling from the sky, don’t you think?”

“Ah,” she said with a pleased smirk, “Now that’s where you’ll have to suspend your disbelief momentarily.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve kind of already been working on that,” she told her.

Again with the smirk.

“The mechanics of it all escapes me but, according to ARGUS experts, the HIVE ship was powered by some sort of temporal engine; something to do with quantum singularities or some such.”

“Like Doctor Who,” she said dryly. “Who knew Amanda Waller was a Whovian?”

“I’m sorry, I’m not familiar.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she told her. “Anyway, you said something about ‘temporal engines’?”

“It was just a theory, of course, but when the ship blew, some of the remnants were not only dispersed physically but temporally as well.”

“I don’t believe it,” Felicity said cutting her off. “Look, I’m trying to give you the benefit of the doubt, honest to God, but if you’re going to try and bullshit me you could at least do me the courtesy of making it sound realistic.”

“It’s true,” she said with a hint of amusement. “I realize it sounds fantastic but it is a fact that some of the wreckage traveled through time as well as space. Luckily, the vast majority of it disintegrated in the atmosphere, but some made its way to a few key spots throughout the world. One part of the engine landed in or around 1200 BCE on a remote island called ‘Themyscira’.”
“The Amazons,” she said pursing her lips and arching an eyebrow.

“Yes, the Amazons. They found the engine and hid it for safe keeping. They thought it was a gift from the gods as, not only did devastating storms appear around the island that couldn’t be seen from the island itself thus protecting it from invaders, but the island began to move, its coordinates constantly shifting even though the occupants on the island experienced no geological instability whatsoever. In addition, as long as the Amazons remained on the island, they stopped aging entirely and began to demonstrate superhuman abilities.”

“So….Amazons,” she said slowly. “Real Amazons. Like in Xena.”

“Real Amazons,” Miranda confirmed. “Also, as Wildcat will tell you, there were metahumans long before the particle accelerator explosion. Our theory is that other pieces of the wreckage may have been responsible or that it has to do with some kind of radiation. Another piece of the wreckage landed in Gotham in our timeline around three or so years ago then somehow wound up in ARGUS hands where it was supposedly destroyed but was instead moved to an abandoned military base on the other side of the country on Amanda Waller’s orders.”

“You’re talking about the Omega Device, aren’t you?”

Miranda didn’t so much as bat an eyelash.

You’ve got to be fucking kidding me with this shit, she thought. It’s like something out of a bad Syfy channel flick. What next? Sharknado hits Kane Square, news at eleven? When the hell did shit like this become real life? When the *hell* did actual real conversations about aliens and time travel become *her* new normal? Goddamn fuck a duck!

The other woman’s eyebrows shot up at that.

“I said that out loud, didn’t I?” Felicity muttered. “The whole thing or just the last part? Because, yeah, I do that sometimes but I have been getting better so…I see.” She looked at her, “Sorry about the ‘Sharknado’ thing and the ‘fuck a duck’ part…and the blasphemy…if you care about that sort of thing which, you know, I can understand if you do and I’m cool with it, just, uh…yeah. Time traveling alien invasion force, you said? And they want to bodysnatch us and turn us into superpowered bee people. Wow. Kind of makes you never want to eat honey again given that people don’t have a honey stomach or a ventriculus, and I can’t imagine that even if we did have those organs that the process of trophallaxis would be all that pleasant for either party involved…”
She caught the look on the other woman’s face, “Yeah, Sharknado…” she said roundly then popped her lips softly. “So you were saying?”

She cleared her throat, “Anyway, Lex Luthor is a collector of unique objects and came across a sample of the ‘pollen’ the HIVE aliens used in the mind control process. Ever since then he’s been trying to get his hands on more and more of the alien tech. Amanda Waller has as well and the two of them are well on their way to forming an alliance. Waller feels that all metas are a threat to national security and must be eliminated or conscripted and controlled. Luthor doesn’t really care as long as he gets the power he seeks. Together and separately, they’ve been aggressively searching for as much as the tech as possible.”

“So how do the Amazons fit into this?” Felicity asked.

“Luthor has been hunting down the lost island of Themyscira for years and nearly found it. Waller came even closer. The Amazons, hoping to make a peace treaty with us, sent out a representative who Waller immediately had taken into custody assuming she was just another meta. In addition to the princess—”

Felicity cut in, “Princess?”

“Diana,” she offered.

“Oh. Princess. Princess Diana, yeah. We’ve met; tall, gorgeous, great hair…yeah,” she said then motioned for her to continue.

“In addition to the princess, Waller had gotten hold of some of our assets as well. When we stormed the holding facility, we released Diana along with our own personnel. After getting to know us and our methods, she helped open negotiations between the Themyscirian queen and our organization.” She leaned forward slightly, “The Amazons quickly decided that the best way to protect themselves would be to throw their lot in with us and form a partnership. The ‘army’, the HIVE operation, all of it is about keeping Luthor and Waller from getting hold of any more potential weapons.”

“So…who are you planning on using the army on; Waller, Luthor, or the League?”

“All of the above,” she told her. “The League for obvious reasons, and Waller and Luthor because both of them have used the memory pollen as both a tool to increase their power base or, as in Lois Lane’s case, a weapon.”
“Okay, I’m….I’m going to stop talking about the bee aliens for a second so I can…process this whole ‘thing’,” Felicity said blowing out a harsh breath. “Not that I expect to be able to do that anytime soon…like ever.”

“Amy other questions I can answer for you then?” Miranda asked.

Felicity looked at her and decided to throw caution to the wind, “How much do you know about Ra’s al Ghul?”

*\*\*/\*\*\*/\*\*\*/\*\*\*/\*\*\*/\*\*\*\*/\*\*\*\*/

Batman landed them on the nearby rooftop and immediately, and without ceremony, dumped Superman on the ground.

“Thanks for that,” the other man said with a scowl as he leveraged himself upright.

Batman watched as the other man seemed to gain in strength and got to his feet, albeit still a bit shakily, “What was that back there?”

“I don’t know,” he said dusting off his armor with a grimace. “Nothing like that has ever happened to me before.”

“Did you hit your head?” He asked gruffly.

“No, it wasn’t from the fight; I don’t know what it was,” he said with a sigh. “All I know is that one minute I was fine and the next thing I knew it was like all my energy just drained away and I hit the deck.” He shook his head ruefully, “That was a unique experience I hope not to be repeating anytime soon.”

“Do you need medical attention?”

“No, but thanks,” he said, a bit more sincerely this time. “My armor can take care of any residual
medical concerns until my healing factor kicks in. I should be back to 100% in a few minutes.”

He eyed the other man’s suit again, this time with interest, “Are you really an alien or are you a metahuman?”

“Alien,” he said a bit reluctantly, “but I’ve lived on Earth almost all of my life.” He threw him a challenging look, “And just in case you were thinking of asking; no, I have no intentions of leading an alien invasion or taking over the world.”

“Actually I was planning on asking you about the armor next but that’s good to know,” he said wryly.

“It’s alien, too. It’s actually a type of symbiotic—no, wait; what did Luthor mean by ‘your mutual friend’?” He asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

“I don’t know.” Which, unfortunately, was the truth. He didn’t know and he didn’t like the fact that Luthor had chosen to use the same code phrase Felicity used with Detective Lance or that he referenced the Wayne Foundation Charity Gala in such a way that implied he knew who he was under the cowl.

As if reading his mind, Superman’s expression hardened, “Could he have possibly been referring to your fiancée, Batman? Or should I say Bruce Wayne?”

“No, Superman, or should I say Mr. Kent, he was not,” he said without skipping a beat.

The other man paused, “How did you--?”

“Try wearing a mask,” he said brusquely.

“Most people don’t notice anything past the glasses,” he said shifting a bit uncomfortably.

“I’m not most people,” he said.
“So I noticed,” he said flatly. “Forgive me buy how exactly does a billionaire philanthropist go from running board meetings and hosting charity galas to donning a mask and fighting crime?”

His phone buzzed and he removed it from his belt to check it.

Baby. “It’s a long story; one I don’t really have time to tell at the moment,” he said curtly as he reluctantly hit ‘ignore’.

The other man eyed his phone curiously, “Sounds like a pretty unique story.”

“You’d be surprised,” he said dryly as he tucked the cell back in his belt. “How did you get the information you confronted me with this afternoon?”

“I heard you talking about it with Mr. Fox, just like I heard him talking over your coms earlier,” he said, tapping his own ear lightly.

//Fantastic.// Lucius grumbled in his ear.

“Enhanced hearing.” It wasn’t a question.

“Among other things.”

“Hmm,” he said noncommittally.

“Aren’t you going to ask me if I intend to out you to the public as Batman?”

“No.”

“Why not?” He asked curiously.

“Because even if you did, no one would believe you,” he said simply. “And, even if they did, no one
would believe Lucius Fox was in, what did you call it?” He paused, “Ah yes, ‘cahoots’ with the Batman.”

//I can hardly believe it myself most days./ Lucius said grudgingly.

He gave him a knowing look, “And also because if I did, you’d expose me as Superman.”

“I don’t need to,” he deadpanned. “Again, you might want to think about getting a better disguise than a pair of glasses and a lack of good grooming habits.”

“It was a pigeon,” he flushed. “You know what? Never mind. Now do you believe me about Luthor being the one behind all of this? It’s fairly obvious he knows something.”

“I don’t doubt he does but, if he is behind the attack on Lois, then who was the woman who broke into his vault and what was she looking for?”

“I don’t know but she was strong,” Superman muttered. “At least as strong as me.” He blew out a frustrated breath, “Could she have been the woman he was referring to then? Had you ever seen her before? He mentioned the gala; I’m assuming he means the one your foundation is hosting, correct?”

“I’ve never seen that woman in my life,” he said honestly. “It didn’t escape my notice, however, that she never spoke or even made a sound. Also she appeared to be almost blank faced throughout your entire altercation; robotic almost.”

“You think she was a robot?” He asked, his eyebrows lifting in disbelief. “‘Cause I can tell you, she wasn’t.” The other man again flushed slightly, “I, uh, my hand may have slipped and…”

“That’s enough, I think I’ve got the picture,” he said sardonically.

“Okay, well, not a robot,” he said, averting his gaze. “So what now?”

“Now we go back to Gotham and work it from that end while you continue to look into Luthor here,” he told him. “In the meantime, I would appreciate it if you kept me in the loop and I’ll do the same if I find out anything on my end.”
“Okay,” he said in mild surprise. “What about the paper?”

“No promises,” he told him. “Like I said before, it’s a business decision, not personal, but if I do wind up selling the paper I’ll figure out a way to see to it you keep getting a steady paycheck. I’m sure we can find a place for you at Wayne Publishing.”

“It’s not about a paycheck,” he said with a hint of irritation.

“I get that,” he assured him, easing up a bit. “Look, you can’t compromise on your ethics and I can’t let down my shareholders. Even if we can clear Lois’s name and can prove your theory about Luthor, the paper is still going to take a huge financial hit from all this. If I sell the paper, we might be able to avoid layoffs and Edge is the one making us the best offer right now.”

“Fine, I get it,” the other man said with a grimace.

“I meant what I said about getting you a job with Wayne Publishing,” he offered again.

“Thanks but I can find something on my own if it comes to that,” he said nodding.

“Keep my number,” he told him, taking that as his cue to leave. “And if you change your mind we can work something out.”

“I will,” he said with a hint of newfound respect despite his obvious disappointment, “Also, I want you to know I intend to keep your girl out of it; not because of the offer, but because…” he gave him a crooked smile, “Anyway, thanks for having my back.”

Batman nodded once then turned and deployed his grappling gun once again. As he swung out into the night, Lucius spoke.

//So Superman is actually Clark Kent, award winning journalist and Wayne Enterprises employee?//

“Apparently,” he said gruffly.
"I can’t wait to get home and turn over the handling of your coms to someone else," Lucius said with a sigh. "Even in Metropolis you can’t go to a simple business meeting without running into another damn mask, can you?"

“It wasn’t exactly intentional,” he told him as he ran across another rooftop as he raced towards their hotel.

"It never is with you people. And to think; my life used to be so normal."

="\?

“How much do I know about Ra’s?” She said with an empty smile that didn’t reach her eyes. "Probably more than any other person on the face of the planet. Why?”

“You said before that Orbital was formed specifically to go after groups like the League and Ra’s in particular; is this Amazon army of yours part of that?” She paused, “I mean, in addition to stopping us all from becoming giant bee people.”

A hint of real amusement ghosted over her expression, “They weren’t trying to turn us into ‘bee people’. They were trying to--”

“I know, turn us into empty drone vessels so they could dominate us with some kind of hive mind thing; yeah, you say tomato, I say ‘giant bee people’,” she said waving her off. “Anyway, so is it?”

“Well, they aren’t exactly an ‘army’; they’re a group of like-minded female warriors with whom we share common goals, but yes,” she nodded. “Ra’s is desperate for true immortality and the Amazons have that on Themyscira which is but one of the many reasons why we haven’t discussed them or their mission with anyone. Right now ARGUS, the League, and Luthor view Orbital as a rival and an annoyance, not a threat. Luthor and Ra’s because we’re women and therefore incapable of beating them and Waller because she believes herself to be virtually untouchable. If they knew our goals and about our connection to the Themyscirians, all three groups would be storming the gates and we’d be forced to fight their war instead of ours. When the time comes, and it is coming, we intend to launch an all-out strike to wipe out the League once and for all.”

“What about Luthor and ARGUS?” She asked, “Do you intend to take them down as well?”
“We do,” she admitted, “But not in the same way we intend to take down Ra’s. Waller and Luthor have to be taken out by far more subtler methods.”

“Like, say, a political scandal?” She asked her.

“We weren’t behind the attack on Lois Lane,” she said again.

“But you were part of it.”

Miranda sat back on the couch and observed her quietly for a moment before answering, “Yes.”

“Okay,” she nodded slowly. “So do you mind telling me what it is that’s been going on this entire time?”

She took a deep breath and grimaced, “One of the reasons we targeted Queen Consolidated, besides the fact that Oliver Queen is the Arrow, is because his company and LuthorCorp have frequently done business in the past when Robert Queen was in charge. However, Luthor is even more paranoid about his security than Bruce Wayne and that’s saying a lot. He’s constantly surrounded by a virtual army and trusts absolutely no one. However, even Lex Luthor has to delegate. For a few years now, ever since the particle accelerator exploded and the world learned of ‘meta-humans’, Luthor has slowly been building an uneasy alliance with Amanda Waller but, because he has political aspirations, he often sends an intermediary in his place.”

“Sebastien Mallory,” she offered then frowned. “That doesn’t make a whole lot of sense; Mallory is just a junior executive in his company; even though he managed to screw the pooch with the Miller thing, he’s still nowhere close to the top of the LuthorCorp food chain.”

“Exactly,” Miranda nodded, “He’s expendable and he’s close enough to the top that Luthor could meet with him and not arouse suspicions but low enough in the totem pole that no one would immediately suspect him. But all that changed with Miller.”

“So you’re telling me that you did all this just to take out one of Luthor’s guys?” She said, her voice echoing her disbelief.
“Think of this like a chess game or, better yet, a spider web. Everything is being held together with delicate little stands but, sooner or later, when enough of them are tripped, the spider catches her meal,” she said with a cold smile. “Miller was, in addition to being a corrupt pig, in Waller’s back pocket. While he was blackmailing everyone else, she was blackmailing him. We needed to take out Waller and Luthor so we did it by using their own assets against them.” She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a slightly more confidential level, “One of Isabel’s greatest strengths, besides her business acumen, is her ability to get what she wants by instantly profiling her mark and then using his or her weaknesses against them. With Miller it was greed and with Mallory it was sex.”

“Isabel was sleeping with Sebastien Mallory?” She said in surprise.

She nodded, “I didn’t really get into the particulars of it with Isabel but, apparently Miller is fond of pain and likes being dominated, a role that Isabel is familiar with from her past relationship with Robert Queen.”

Felicity’s jaw dropped, “Seriously?”

“Surely that can’t come as a surprise,” the other woman said in mild amusement. “She told you that Robert was bisexual and frequently engaged in swinging as well as group sex.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t always equate being into whips and chains, too—not that I know anything about that kind of thing,” she said quickly, then added, “and not that being into that kind of thing is bad! I mean, people like what they like so who am I to judge, but…” She took a breath, rubbed her temple, and blew it out slowly, “Okay, I don’t think I want to know about this after all. There are just some things I do not need to know.”

And certain people that I still have to face eventually…

Miranda smirked at her reaction then continued, “Robert had memberships in several elite underground sex clubs that catered to the rich and powerful and, through her long-standing relationship with him, does Isabel. One of her contacts informed her that Mallory was a member of one of these underground clubs so she made contact and formed a relationship with him. At first, she merely intended to use him to find out what Waller and Luthor were planning, but Mallory soon became a more valuable source of information than either of us had ever suspected. He told us about a mind control ‘pollen’ that they had discovered and that both Waller and Luthor were attempting to synthesize.”

“HIVE,” she injected.
Miranda nodded, “However they didn’t have a lot of it, only a small sample, and their efforts to synthesize it were hit or miss at best. The original pollen made the users absolutely loyal and obedient to the HIVE Queen but they still appeared normal for the most part. The synthesized formula, however, caused its victims to behave either like mindless drones or induced severe seizures and memory loss.”

“Like with Lois Lane.”

“Exactly.”

“So Luthor used this drug on Lane?” She said in confusion.

“Mallory did,” she said with a grimace.

“Okay,” she said slowly as her brain began to throb with pain.

She was definitely going to have to take some aspirin after this conversation. Or maybe morphine. Or better yet, Diggle’s ‘aspirin’.

Frankly, this whole conversation was as painful as a gunshot wound right now.

“Isabel spent months grooming Mallory, setting up the deal with LuthorCorp, and getting him to bribe Miller while we carefully put our plan into action. Lois Lane had been investigating Miller for a while. When the time came, Isabel contacted Lois Lane anonymously and dropped a trail of breadcrumbs that eventually led her, not only to Miller, but to Mallory and LuthorCorp. The plan was to take out Luthor and Miller while Waller was busy dealing with the fall out over the drone strike she ordered against the Blood Army a year and a half ago. Miller was her ace in the hole with Oversight. Without him there to use his influence on her behalf, their whole house of cards would fall.”

“So what went wrong?”

“Isabel apparently didn’t have as much control over Mallory as she thought she did,” she said grimly. “The plan was always to name Mallory as the whistleblower who took down Luthor. Lois never
actually met her true source, Isabel, as they’d always exchanged information via dead drops and untraceable email accounts. Isabel, on behalf of Mallory, agreed to reveal ‘himself’ during the hearing in exchange for an immunity deal. It was a good plan,” Miranda said with a scowl, “but like all plans that depend solely on the actions of others, things sometimes go wrong. Isabel had promised to take care of Mallory financially but, as the hearing wore on, things began to change. He became more and more demanding and changed his mind about coming forward once he realized that he’d never be able to work for another tech company ever again. Isabel’s other mistake was that she was so focused on her job at QC, that she forgot why she was there in the first place,” she said with a hint of darkness that had Felicity recalling what it was Isabel said about how Miranda wasn’t a businesswoman and therefore didn’t understand how things worked. “She spent so much time treating her cover like it was a real job instead of babysitting him like she was supposed to, that he began to have doubts. He started to believe that, not only would she renege on her promise to take care of him, but that Luthor would get off since Edge was making him out to be some kind of martyr who should run for president. If that happened, he knew he’d be dead. He panicked basically; he thought that even with the immunity deal, if Luthor didn’t go down, he would, so he got a sample of the synthesized pollen and somehow managed to dose her.”

She ran her hand over her hair and narrowed her eyes in confusion, “But if she didn’t know who he was, then what good would dosing her do? I mean, unless he knew she’d collapse like that?”

“Yes, well, that’s the other thing. If you watch the footage you’ll notice that up until the senator begins asking about her source, Lois appears perfectly fine. Mallory used the drug to leave a post-hypnotic suggestion to make her appear confused and unreliable as a witness. He also bragged to Isabel about the fact that he had someone hack into the files to take care of all the evidence. I doubt he intended to induce her stroke, but I doubt he really cared either way because her collapse accomplished what he set out to do.”

“When I watched the hearing Mallory was smiling so, yeah, but Miller was pretty calm as well; was he in on it, too?”

“And this is the part I was getting to. We believe Mallory made a side deal with Miller,” she said at last. “Unfortunately, as I said, Isabel lost control of the situation and, as a result, Mallory went rogue and stopped communicating with her so I had to send her in to try and salvage things.”

“Salvage how?”

Miranda gave her a calculating look, “Felicity, you’ve worked for the Arrow, you’ve been in situations where sometimes unpleasant options have to be explored…”

“You’re going to assassinate Mallory?” She asked incredulously.
“No, not assassinate; we have a policy of not killing civilians unless we have no other choice. We did, however, intend to take him into custody so we could find out where Luthor is keeping the tech. Besides, as it turns out, it wasn’t us Mallory should have been worried about; it was Miller.”

“I’m totally lost…” Felicity said faintly.

“Think about it,” she said calmly, “Why do you think he chose to make his take down of Lois Lane so public?”

“To discredit her, like you said,” she frowned.

“That’s part of it, but he could have just as easily had her confess to making it all up before the hearing or influenced the Oversight committee to sweep it all under the rug, plus this drug was unreliable and he knew that. Things could have easily gone wrong, the drug may have worn off or she could have fought its effects and his plan would fail. Mallory may be a greedy, spineless bastard, but he isn’t stupid. Even if everything went absolutely to plan, his reputation was already ruined and he was desperate to salvage something from all of this.”

“So…what then?” She said shaking her head before her mind seized onto what she was implying, “You’re saying that Mallory and Miller staged all that so they could somehow cash in? How?”

“We know Mallory has access to this synthesized pollen and we have intel says the hearing was their way of demonstrating the effectiveness of the drug to the highest bidder. Already there are rumors that several terrorist organizations around the globe are interested in getting into a bidding war over the drug but they already have a buyer in mind; can you guess who?”

“Ra’s al Ghul?” She said taking a stab in the dark.

“Bingo,” she said with a triumphant grin. “Our own contacts say that Miller is making it known to the right people, meaning Ra’s and his intermediaries, that he can get them what they need for the right price but the senator isn’t really known for sharing his profits with others. We knew that once Mallory handed him what he needed, he’d be dead, plus Mallory knows where Luthor is keeping his private stash, as it were.” She looked at her, her countenance grim, “Can you imagine what someone like Ra’s al Ghul could do with a piece of technology that has the potential to enslave the entire planet?”
“You said that the synthesized drug didn’t really work though,” she pointed out. “Plus, according to you, there’s not a whole lot of it which means…”

“Which means nothing,” she told her flatly. “I said Luthor had been unsuccessful at synthesizing the drug. That doesn’t mean Ra’s will be. For all of Luthor’s power and resources, he still has to color somewhat within the lines. He has Waller as both an asset and a liability and, as Mallory illustrated through his actions, even your most trusted employees can betray you. He has to employ scientists and researchers to work on the formula and he has no other choice but to keep his operation discreet which is why he hasn’t yet succeeded. Ra’s doesn’t have that problem. His followers worship him as their prophet, they are absolutely loyal to his cause, and he, himself, is a brilliant scientist and polymath who has lived hundreds of years. If anyone could make this technology work, it’s Ra’s, and we can’t allow that to happen.”

“So Isabel has gone to kidnap Mallory?”

She nodded, “We sent in a small team to retrieve him and to break into Luthor’s private vault at Lexcorp. It was a longshot, but we thought that given the fact that Mallory seemed to have access to the drug that Luthor could be keeping it close at hand and in a place Mallory also had access to, so it made sense. Unfortunately we were wrong…about a lot of things.”

“What do you mean?” She asked with a frown.

“Mallory is dead,” She said with a sigh as she leaned back in her chair.

“Isabel killed him?”

“No,” she said dryly. “Isabel merely found the body. She called to tell me that when she got to Mallory’s office he was dead. Chances are it was either Miller or Luthor who got to him first; we’re going to assume it was Luthor since, as far as we can tell, the deal hasn’t gone down yet. Until Miller got the tech, he needed Mallory alive. Additionally, the operation to break into Luthor’s vault proved fruitless and the team we sent to his apartment also came up empty handed as did Isabel when she searched his office.”

“So what’s plan B?” She asked as she attempted to continue to suspend her disbelief.

It wasn’t easy though. Soup to nuts, this whole thing was turning into a total mindfuck.
Again Miranda’s eyebrow arched in amusement.

She tilted her head up and shut her eyes as mortification rolled right on over her, “Yeah, I have really got to stop saying what I’m thinking out loud…”

“‘Mindfuck’ is a pretty accurate way of putting it actually,” the other woman said wearily. “Now you see why I didn’t loop you in right away.”

“So, wait; I’m still missing something here,” she said rolling it all over in her head. “If all of this was the plan all along, even if it didn’t pan out, then why would Isabel implicate herself and QC? The only reason she didn’t get caught was because I covered her tracks in order to protect Oliver’s company; that’s how this whole thing got started in the first place.”

Miranda’s mouth curled into a triumphant smile, banishing some of the gloominess from her expression, “You didn’t save Isabel. Or rather, you did, but she never intended on implicating herself.”

She blinked, “Now I really am lost.”

“It was your job interview.”

Her brows drew together, “Pardon?”

“Isabel intended for you to ‘discover’ what she was up to. We knew who you were and what you were doing for the Arrow for months.”

She opened and closed her mouth a few times but honestly couldn’t come up with anything to say. Finally she went with, “I punched Isabel.”

In her defense, it had been a long night.

Miranda chuckled, “Yes, you did,” she said with a grin. “That was both unexpected and a big part of what really sold it for both of us.”
She placed her hand across her forehead and just stared at her openmouthed, “Just—just—okay, what…?”

Miranda leaned in, still chuckling, and placed a supportive hand on her knee, giving it a gentle pat, before sitting back again, “I’m sorry for deceiving you like that but we needed to know if you were really the right candidate for the position we wanted to offer you. Had you decided to leave Isabel to her fate and let QC go down in flames, well, obviously you wouldn’t have gotten the job.”

“Okay, let’s say I believe you, then how did you know Lois Lane would try to hack QC and how did you know I’d catch it?”

Her grin widened, “Isabel is a very good actress and probably one of the best operatives I’ve ever seen when it comes to infiltration and inveiglement, however, she’s not always the best judge pf character. While she knew about your role in the Arrow’s organization, she was convinced that you weren’t right for Orbital because of your suspected relationship with Oliver Queen.”

“I knew that part, yeah,” she said dryly.

“I wasn’t so sure,” she told her. “There was no real proof of a physical relationship between you and, even if you were involved, it didn’t mean you weren’t qualified. We were aware that you’d been strengthening QC’s firewalls, especially since we were trying to lead Lois towards Mallory and part of that was allowing her to hack the right files. Our own team here discovered your improvements months ago which is what really caught our interest. We also knew you suspected Isabel which, given that Oliver had all but handed her the keys to the kingdom, brought you up further in my estimation.” She gave her a steady look, “I realize how this is going to sound, and I’m sorry Isabel was hostile and rude towards you, but her behavior was designed to throw everyone off and, with the exception of yourself, she was successful.”

“Wait, back up; how was Isabel’s hostile and inappropriate behavior supposed to throw anyone off?” She asked.

Again, Miranda threw her a sardonic look, “As you know, men are fairly straightforward thinkers for the most part. They often see only what they expect to see, even when the men in question are used to wearing masks themselves. From the very beginning Isabel was playing a role. She came into QC as the ice queen and planned to allow Oliver to ‘thaw’ her over time. Men like Oliver enjoy a challenge so that’s what she provided. She challenged him in the boardroom and then in the bedroom. After he got what he was after, she took on the classic role of ‘jealous woman’ by behaving in a catty and aggressive manner towards you.”
“That was the plan?” She said dubiously.

“It worked, didn’t it?” She shrugged, “Oliver Queen is a man of habit, like most men are. He’s used to the women he chooses behaving in certain ways. When he slept with Isabel and then she supposedly became jealous and aggressive towards you, because he expected her to behave that way, it made it easier for him to dismiss her as a non-threat. It sounds illogical, but it’s simply reverse psychology: She provided a target, allowed him to ‘win’, then showed him the behavior he wanted to see. It played into his ego and when you reacted to her behavior and tried to warn him something was off, he was able to dismiss your concerns because he perceived your distrust of her in the same way he did Isabel’s behavior. He simply saw you as two women reduced to fighting over a man which, again, played into his ego.”

As Miranda spoke she went from confused to pissed, although she wasn’t sure if it was at herself, Oliver, or Isabel.

However, her money was on Oliver because, yeah, that did make perfect sense.

“So you dismissed me as a non-threat,” she said.

“Isabel did,” she admitted, “but her ego got away from her in that regard as well. I, however, saw your potential. When our team here couldn’t easily hack your firewalls even with Isabel on the inside and all of the tech available to us, I knew I wanted to recruit you. We investigated you and were pleasantly surprised to learn of your connection to both the Batman and the Arrow who, in a way, acted as your professional and personal references.”

“So, you decided to see my entire life as one big résumé?”

“Isn’t that what a résumé is?” She countered. “It was your curriculum vitae; your whole life has led up to this whether you realize it or not. Not every MIT graduate or loyal EA can be an effective handler for a team of vigilantes, much less two. You have to have a special kind of fire in your belly for that. Furthermore, to be the director of this facility you had to show that you were capable of operating independently of the Arrow’s mission. You did that when you made the choice to save Isabel and the company while still allowing Lois to get to the information she needed to take down Miller. *That* was what got you the job. Hitting Isabel?” She grinned, “Well, that just put you over the top, in my opinion. Plus, I’ll admit to wanting to do that a few times myself.”

She, however, wasn’t smiling.
“So this whole thing, from day one; it was all connected?” She said skeptically.

“Spider web,” she reminded her. “All of it was built on subtle connections that, from the outside seem to be completely unrelated, until you look at it the right way. First there was the particle accelerator exploding and the sudden increase in people with meta abilities. Luthor and Waller, both for similar reasons, began pursuing the lost technology; Luthor because, more than anything else, he thrives on power and Waller out of her own prejudice and twisted sense of patriotism. Mallory linked the two of them then formed another link to Miller who then came under our scrutiny by fielding offers from organizations headed by Ra’s al Ghul which led you to this point.”

“Yeah…I guess that makes sense,” she frowned.

She was still missing something but what she had no clue. Even as unbelievable as her story was, it did all make sense in a weird way. Even if she didn’t believe all of it, the pieces fit together almost perfectly.

Maybe too perfectly.

Shaking off the sense of dread slowly creeping over her she asked, “So what now? Miller still has the tech, right? Or Luthor. What’s plan B?”

She took a deep breath and her expression once again grew grim, “Plan B was Savant,” she told her. “He’s *the* information broker in our world. If anyone would know who has what we need and where, it would be him. That’s the reason why Waller and the League want him so badly.”

“But the mission to retrieve him failed,” she finished for her, suddenly understanding why Miranda was so stressed during the op.

“That’s the reason we conducted the three missions simultaneously. We were hoping to be successful with all of them but, as long as we got one, we were good. Now though…”

“Is there a plan C?” She asked hopefully.

“Not yet,” she admitted grudgingly. “However we’ll regroup and try again. Just because we lost the
battle doesn’t mean we’ve lost the war. Of course, now that Luthor knows what we were after, he won’t be letting his guard down again for quite some time. The good news is that if he has the tech he’ll be disinclined to use it for a while. We hope anyway, but we don’t intend to take our eyes off him either.”

“And Miller?”

“If he made promises to Ra’s that he can no longer keep, we won’t have to worry about him for much longer,” she said darkly.

“But he could,” she pointed out.

“I doubt it,” she said shaking her head. “Even if we’re wrong, he won’t risk exposing himself until all this dies down and that will buy us some time. With Mallory’s murder happening a day after Lane’s collapse, all eyes are going to be on him and, if he tries to sneak out of the country, he’ll be a sitting duck for the League, ARGUS, and Orbital so, chances are, he’s going to stay put for now.” She addressed her calmly, “So now that you know everything, what’s the verdict?”

Felicity looked at her quizzically, “What do you mean?”

“Are you staying with the organization or are you leaving?” She asked pointedly.

Good question.

“First answer me this; are you purposefully drawing in members of Batman’s and Arrow’s teams and, if so, to what end?”

Miranda propped her elbow on the armrest and tapped her fingers on her chin before answering her with a look of amusement, “Yes, we are, but we’re doing it for you.”

“Me?” She asked, taken slightly aback.

“We chose people you could trust, people you had either already worked with or who you knew of through your association with Batman.”
“But they told me they’ve been working here since the facility opened…” she said shaking her head.

“And I also told you that we’ve been watching you for months as well,” she reminded her. “We wanted to make sure that when you got here you’d be surrounded by people you knew you could trust; people you probably would have picked for yourself if given the opportunity.”

“But what if I had turned down the job?” She asked her.

“You were never going to turn down the job,” she said confidently.

“How do you know?”

Miranda smiled, a genuine smile that, this time, did reach her eyes, “I knew because, when I see you, it’s like I’m looking in a mirror. We’re two sides of the same coin, Felicity. I merely picked the kind of people I knew I would choose if I were in your position. If nothing else convinced you to take us up on our offer, I knew that having the opportunity to run your own team filled with men and women you admired and trusted was something you could never turn down. And tonight, the way you handled your team and got them to focus on the mission despite their initial reluctance, proved just how much they trusted you and you trusted them. You can’t buy that kind of loyalty; that’s something you have to earn and you did that.”

“Thanks.”

I think, she added mentally.

Miranda got up from her chair and Felicity followed suit.

“Look, I’ve given you a lot to process and I want you to take a few days to really decide whether you want to remain on the team,” Felicity opened her mouth to speak but the other woman cut her off. “I insist,” she said firmly. “Besides, your family will be busy preparing for the Foundation event and, because the city will be in an uproar until the weekend, we’re shutting down the facility until Monday.”

“I didn’t think vigilantes took holidays,” she said jokingly.
“Batman is this city’s guardian, not Orbital,” she reminded her. “Eventually we would like to have an open relationship with both his team and the Arrow’s but, for now, our focus remains global, not local. Other OO branches can take up the slack for now. Your team may not have been successful but they deserve a reward for what they’ve been through and you need to absorb everything I’ve told you and really decide for yourself once and for all if this is what you want. If you decide to leave, I’ll understand, but I hope you’ll stay. At the very least, I want you to know we consider you to be a strong ally and the door will always be open should you choose to return.”

“Yeah, thanks,” she said quietly. “And, um, sorry about tonight…”

Miranda smiled at her and ran her hand down her arm in an almost sisterly manner, “Hey, like I said, the war’s not over yet. This isn’t the first battle we’ve lost and it won’t be the last. That’s why we call our core team ‘Leviathan’ and why I chose the handle ‘Tiamat’; even through all the chaos, even if it looks like we’ve lost, we always rally. As women, as sisters, we will always find a way to win, nothing can ever keep us down for long. We’ll just take this setback for what it is, learn from our failures, then come back even stronger next time. We’re survivors, remember?”

“Right. Yeah. Survivors.”

*\/?\/?*\/?*\/?*

Felicity walked outside with Laurel, dialing Bruce as soon as she was at the car, “Do you want to stop by an all-night diner on the way home? Maybe get a burger or something?”

“Actually, Renee and I already made plans. She wanted to go get something to eat before we hit an early meeting together,” she told her. “Do you want to come along? I know you might not want to hang around for the meeting but you could come back and pick us up then we could all go do something?”

His voicemail picked up so she hung up the phone and got inside the car, cranking up the heat as soon as the engine turned over. “Naw, that’s okay. Do you guys want to use the van? I know you don’t want to ride on the back of her motorcycle in this weather, right?”

“Definitely,” she nodded. “Are you sure you’re okay with that? Renee will have to drive.”

“It’s fine by me,” she pulled up to the gate then glanced at her as they waited for it to open, “You
know, I can fix that driver’s license issue for you. All I have to do is hack into the system and take it off your record. I can even make you a new license right there in the FelicityCave; I have all the equipment for it already set up. Bruce has to forge documents all the time so…?”

“Yeah, I appreciate it but…” she wrinkled her nose slightly and gave her an uncertain look, “I think I need to do this the hard way. If I let people keep fixing things for me…it makes it easier to fall back into bad habits, you know?”

“I get it,” she nodded.

“Thanks though.” Laurel said warmly. “You’ve really had my back and…” she swallowed, “I want you to know that you’ve become more than just a friend; you’re family.”

“You, too,” she said, reaching out to clasp the other woman’s hand warmly before heading off into the night. “Us birds of a feather have got to stick together, right?


“I just realized something,” Felicity said with a frown.

“What?”

“If no one lost the bet then that means that I’m probably going to get stuck doing the dishes, aren’t I?”

“I’ll help you,” she promised. “And Renee can dry since we definitely know she can’t cook.”

“True,” she said, remembering the eggs the other woman had made them. “At least the eggshells gave them a nice crunch.”

“I’ve never had eggs that were both over and undercooked before,” she said shaking her head. “Next time we should just do what Luke did and have Pop Tarts instead.”
They took a second to grin at each other.

“Birds of Prey forever, right?”

“Birds of Prey forever,” she agreed.
Chapter Fifty-Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Chapter Fifty-Six

After handing the keys to the van off to Renee and Laurel in the parking garage, Felicity headed up in the elevator with a sigh.

“Bee aliens,” she said out loud just to hear the sound of it as it echoed in the small enclosed space.
She paused, “Time traveling body-snatching bee aliens bent on world domination by turning everyone on the planet into super-powered meta-humans so they can rip our consciousness from our bodies and turn us into human bee zombies with a hive mind. Like on Animal Planet.” She let that sink in. “Animal Planet with those Emerald Wasp things only they don’t actually lay their eggs inside of us. Or maybe they do. I hope not because that gave me bug nightmares for like a week.” She tilted her head uncertainly, “Either way, it would be bad only with the little bee zombie things we wouldn’t have alien bee larvae eating us from the inside out.”

She contemplated that for all of a second.

“Or not. Do aliens eat people? Not all aliens, just the bee zombie kind. I’m sure Dick’s girlfriend was the good kind and not the, ‘Can I eat you?’ kind.” She winced and pulled a face, “Oh, that…that was highly inappropriate,” she scolded herself before shaking it off. She frowned then wrinkled her nose slightly, “What the hell does a bee alien with a hive mind look like anyway? Like that movie with the *rawr* chomp-y little chest exploding alien baby things with the acid and the double mouths? Did they ever come up for a name for those things other than ‘Alien’?” She bit her bottom lip between her teeth, “I actually felt kind of bad for the little pink one at the end of the movie with Winona Ryder. Yeah, it was a killer alien baby but it loved its mommy and then she killed it. I would have kept it; maybe in the yard or something. I probably would have had to get a really big fence though.” She sighed, “No,” she decided, “no chompy acid aliens; they’d probably look more like the chubby bee girl with glasses from the Blind Melon video.”

Again she allowed that image to roll around in her mind and blinked, “Well, that’s not exactly terrifying, is it?” She tilted her head with a grimace, “Unless you’re the girl in the video who has to spend the rest of her life with people saying, ‘Hey, aren’t you the girl from the weird video with the bees?’ Ooh, what if it’s like an entire horde of chubby bee girls with glasses who want to eat your brains while tap dancing and playing trippy ‘90’s grunge music in the background? Yeah, now that’s scary; that wouldn’t be good at all. Good song though,” she muttered then began to hum under her breath.

“All I can say is that my life is pretty plain. I like watchin’ the puddles gather ray-yain. And all I can dooo…is just pour some tea for twooo…and speak my point of view. But it's not say-yane, It's not say-yay-yay-yane…” she sang to herself, “Bruce should really get some music or something piped into these elevators.” She froze as a horrible thought occurred to her, “Is thinking about people-eating aliens considered racist? It feels a little racist, or speciest, or some bad kind of ‘ist’ to assume that there are aliens who want to eat people. Maybe people taste bad?” She nodded slightly, “I’ve always heard people taste like lamb and lamb is gross. Some people like it but, then again, some people enjoy eating venison and liver and onions, so no thank you. Not that I’m eager to become a cannibal anytime soon.”

Her stomach growled.

“Nice.” She raised her eyebrows slightly and looked down at her stomach, “What does that say about me that I could be talking to myself out loud about cannibalism and then get really hungry? Other than the fact that the only thing I’ve eaten in the last several hours is crunchy overcooked raw scrambled eggs. In any case, I’m so glad nobody heard that otherwise—awkward.” She grimaced as her stomach rumbled again, “Even so, I could really go for a sandwich right now. Not a people sandwich, just a turkey on wheat or something.” She paused thoughtfully once more, “I wonder if they can make people taste like bacon? I could deal with being a people eating bee zombie as long as people didn’t taste like people. Or lamb. Or…venison. And no one told me I was eating a people, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. Not that I like tomato that much either,” she added. She tilted her head back and forth, weighing that in her mind, “This might sound wrong on so many levels but…yeah, I think I could learn to deal with being an alien bee zombie as long as everything tasted like not-people
to my zombie taste buds. No to the ‘eating brains’ thing though. Even after I zombied out, I couldn’t
deal with the texture. It just looks all gray and…slimy; like that Jell-O with the fruit and mayonnaise
someone brought to the office Christmas party that one time. Who sees Jell-O and thinks to add
mayonnaise anyway? Gross,” she wrinkled her nose then sighed, “I’d better eat something soon
because now people are starting to sound pretty good.”

Speaking of awkward…

“Plus Oliver’s dad was a swinging bisexual leather fetishist, Lex Luthor and Amanda Waller are
conspiring to use alien technology to control people’s minds, and Amazons are real, pissed off, and
apparently immortal. Plus they have really great hair.”

Nope, still a mindfuck.

How did this become her life?

She’d been through a lot in the last four years; earthquake machines, people firing arrows at each
other, super soldiers, a mayor who brought community action to a whole other level, people with
powers popping up…

…Poo pirates with pet alligators.

Still, time-traveling bee aliens with mind control pollen…that was a new one.

Did she believe Miranda?

No.

Honestly, no she did not, but not because of the bee alien thing. She accepted the fact that aliens
existed, and she’d seen enough crazy shit to even believe in the whole massive conspiracy thing, and
she knew Amanda Waller was a sociopathic megalomaniac bitch who probably needed to be dealt
with sooner rather than later.

After she got through this mess, that C-U-N-T was number one on her hit-list for sure.

She also didn’t doubt that Lex Luthor wanted in on it because he just seemed like the kind of guy
who might enjoy enslaving people’s minds just for kicks, like at a dinner party or something. She
even could buy the whole temporal explosion thing and the rest of it because A) Uh, Omega device
and B) she met one of Barry’s friends last year, a guy named Ronnie, who could turn his body into
fire and manipulate molecules with his mind so it wasn’t exactly a huge leap to go from accepting a
guy could do that to time travel was possible.

What she couldn’t accept was that Miranda was doing all this for purely altruistic reasons.

Okay, well maybe not *purely* altruistic reasons, she did say she was looking to take down Ra’s
because she blamed him for the deaths of her family, but there was something there, some
undercurrent that bothered her. If she had to pinpoint it, she would have to say it was the look in
Miranda’s eyes that had made her uneasy. At times they could be so warm and almost sisterly, but
then they would go hollow and cold as she spoke. She’d looked into the eyes of killers before,

enough to know when the switch had flipped and they were moving in for the final take down.

She’d known many men and women with blood on their hands, many of them were even her friends,
but after she’d taken a life, she couldn’t bring herself to talk to any of them about it so she talked to
someone else, someone who was neither a friend nor an enemy; Deadshot.
It was after the thing with Slade. They had all been taken to the same hospital so, after spending time
making the rounds with her boys and even checking in on Trevor, she went to see him as well.

He’d been under heavy guard, of course, but Trevor must have said something because the guards
never so much as blinked as she approached his door and moved past them. He appeared to be
asleep but as soon as she sat down at his bedside his eyes opened, clear and alert, letting her know he
had been completely aware of his surroundings the entire time. It didn’t surprise her; she would have
been more shocked if he hadn’t been. Floyd was a hunter, a predator, and Sara had once told her that
predators never really slept because they know that when they close their eyes, that’s when even
predators could become prey.

“How do you do it?” She asked in low tones.

To Floyd’s credit, he didn’t even try to play dumb. He looked her in the eye and said, “It’s a job,
honey bunny; that’s how I do it.” He lifted his arm, the one not in a cast, and pointed his fingers at
her mimicking a gun. He sighted her carefully, aimed, then dropped his thumb like he was dropping
the hammer. “When I look at my targets I don’t see human beings; I see point A,” he held up his
hand again, still pantomiming a pistol, “And point B,” he said pointing it at her again. “I don’t kill for
hate, I don’t kill for revenge, I don’t even kill because they deserve it; it’s a financial transaction,
purely business. There’s no emotion to it. I do my job, I get paid, end of story.”

“Why?”

Again, he did her the courtesy of not asking her to elaborate. Truth be told, she wouldn’t have had
the strength to anyway.

His one remaining eye took on a far off look. “When you’re a sniper, you’re removed from the action. You take lives from a distance and it’s easy to forget that people are real after a while. It’s hard to remember you’re real,” he said plainly and shrugged. He tilted his head, “There’s targets and then there’s not targets, threats and potential threats; but no people. The tattoos are my way of feeling something.” He gave her a long and penetrating look, “I’ve seen too many human beings who kill turn into animals who need to kill. It ain’t that hard to do, you know; it’s all too easy to lose your humanity like that and most people in my line of business do eventually. Being a mad dog is easier, takes less work, but then you become something dangerous and, next thing you know, you’re the one with a target on your back. I’ve taken quite a few of my own kind out of this world for that very reason and I didn’t do it for the money, I did it as a professional courtesy; one true blue bastard to another. I only hope that, should the day ever come when I’m that far gone, someone returns the favor.” He gave her a wry upturn of the corners of his mouth, “Very few people are born killers, sweetness; we’re made into killers, forged like some kind of goddamn weapon over time. You start off like everybody else; same hopes, same dreams, same fears, then one day something happens. You take a life, then another, then another. After a while you start getting numb; the ice in your heart chokes out the humanity, so the pain, the ritual, reminds me that I’m still a person.” He looked at her again, “You should get some sleep.”

“I can’t sleep,” she told him and it was true. By then she hadn’t slept in almost five days. After the third day she stopped even feeling tired and, instead, she merely felt cold and detached, like her head was a balloon connected to reality by a string. Some part of her knew that wasn’t a good thing but she no longer cared at that point.

He just nodded slightly and tilted his head back, staring at the ceiling, “When I woke up in this hospital bed the other day, the first word I said was, ‘shit.’” He offered her a crooked smile, “It’s what I always say; that’s part of the ritual, too. Whenever I wake up not dead yet I say ‘shit’.”

She looked at him passively, “Do you want to die?”

“No,” she told him.

“What not?”

“I still have too much left to do,” and it was true; she did. Not marriage or children, not accomplishments yet to achieve or milestones to reach; but other things, more pressing things. The minutiae of survival, like keeping watch and bringing her people home; those were what kept her breathing. She didn’t have the strength to think beyond that.

Floyd just nodded again as if he understood, “Yeah.” He glanced at her again, “I can keep watch if you need to sleep.”

“I should go,” she said softly instead even though she didn’t move from her chair.

“Right now you’re feeling numb,” he told her, his gaze softening in sympathy.

Or maybe it was empathy; the experienced killer leading the newly hatched one gently into a world of ice-choked hearts and pain.

“Numb is good, numb is your brain’s way of keeping you frosty enough to get the job done. Later on, when the ice melts, that’s when the pain hits you; that’s the hard part. It passes though…at first
anyway,” he said, seeming to age in that moment. “It’s when the ice doesn’t melt, and the pain stops coming; that’s when you need to worry, because that’s when you stop being human and become some kind of soulless killing machine instead.” He looked at her, his one eye cast in the shadows that now surrounded her, “When that happens, all you can do is put a bullet in your head or hope to God someone else does it for you. That or take up tattoo artistry as a hobby but I’d hate to see that happen, sweetness. You’re far too pretty to wind up looking like me.”

They looked at each other silently as his words seemed to penetrate her foggy consciousness.

“Fifteen minutes,” she told him at last.

“A couple hours, preferably more. If you don’t sleep soon you’ll go buggy and that won’t help anybody, least of all your friends out there.” He looked at the stubborn set of her mouth and sighed again, “One hour then.”

She nodded, not bothering to argue further, curled up in the uncomfortable hospital chair, closed her eyes, and slept. Why she felt so safe in the company of a killer she couldn’t say, but she had. It had been the only time she slept in the hospital because they transferred her team back to Starling the next day, but that one hour of peace helped her get through it and she’d always be a little thankful to Lawton for that.

She knew why she was thinking of it now, too. Not because she was tired, even though she was. Not because Bruce was coming home with questions about that day, even though he was. She thought about it because of what Lawton said, about the ice taking over.

There were degrees of coldness to a killer’s stare; anyone who’d ever taken a life was infected by it. Like he said, the ice that gathered there served a purpose; it existed in order to numb the pain and guilt. The more lives you took, the colder it got. Her eyes, Miranda’s eyes, hadn’t merely been cold, they were empty as if a void existed where there should have been a soul and that bothered her.

There was much more to Miranda Tate than met the eye.

The doors of the lift opened. She stepped out of the elevator and had just walked up to the keypad when she caught a flash of green in her peripheral vision. Without hesitating she reached into her bag, pulled out her P99, and turned, leveling her weapon at the intruder with instincts and reflexes born of experience and a will to survive.

Someone stood in the shadows.

“Oh who are you and how did you manage to get up to this floor without a key card?” She asked. Not that it was that hard to do, she admitted silently. She was really going to have to talk to Bruce about upgrading the building’s security as well.

Again she felt a pressure begin at the back of her skull but ignored it, “Answer me,” she said firmly.

“It’s Alice, ma’am,” the figure said, stepping into the light and, for just a second, it was. But then it wasn’t.

Alice was there; a young black woman of around twenty or so, her hair floating around her gamine face in tight, natural dark ringlets, as her large doe-like eyes gave her the appearance of a true innocent, something Felicity hadn’t been in what seemed like a very long time.

But then the pressure in the back of her skull increased and the buzzing at the edge of her hearing made her head throb, then Alice was gone. In her place stood a man…sort of.
He was definitely male which made him a man, it just didn’t necessarily make him human.

He was tall, very well built, with a prominent brow line, reminiscent of Neanderthal. His head sloped upwards into an almost conical shape and he was completely bald; he didn’t even have eyebrows.

Of course, his most striking feature was the fact that he was green and his eyes glowed crimson in their deep set sockets.

“H-holy crap,” Felicity breathed.

Yeah, no matter how many super-soldiers or meta-humans you meet, there is just no way to take something like meeting what she presumed was some kind of alien in stride. Especially not when they transform, right in front of your eyes, from a pretty young woman into something, well, not.

“Director Starling; is something wrong?” He/she asked in confusion. It was his body but the voice was wrong. It was like she was hearing him speak on two separate frequencies. His impossibly rich baritone synced with Alice’s almost musical tones causing the pressure in Felicity’s skull to increase to the point where the world began to wobble and her head began to swim.

Her legs turned to rubber but not from shock. Something was wrong and this was definitely not a good time for her to pass out. She took a deep breath and steadied her weapon, “You aren’t Alice; who or what are you?”

The being before her blinked in surprise…which really didn’t help matters any because apparently ‘Alice’ possessed a nictitating membrane similar to a reptile or a bird that frankly freaked her the fuck out worse than anything.

She was pretty okay up to that point, she was. Not many people could hold it together for as long as she did, but as soon as the thin, almost translucent inner eyelid ran across the glowing red eyes of the creature in front of her, she screamed.

Screamed.

Loudly.

Later she was very grateful for the fact that she hadn’t taken up Miranda’s offer of coffee because then she really would have been embarrassed. As it was she was very lucky she managed not to shoot either it or a hole in the wall. She was also pretty sure her feet left the ground for a second and that she briefly managed to achieve flight. Meanwhile the creature jumped back as well, his hands held in front of him in a calming gesture as he appeared just as shocked as she was.

“You can…how…what?” He sputtered, blinking even more rapidly which really did nothing to calm her down.

“What the *fuck*?!?” She yelled.

Yeah, the social niceties were not a priority at that point.

“I mean you no harm!” He said quickly.

“What the serious *fuck*!” She screeched again.

Again, Miss Manners could lump it.

“This has never happened before,” he said, patting his own chest and looking at himself in
confusion. He looked up at her, his brow furrowed and obviously distressed, “What are you?”

“What are you?!” She shouted back.

“What do you see?” He demanded.

“Big…green..*you*! What the hell do you think?!”

“Are you an alien or a meta-human?” He asked her in obvious confusion.

She goggled at him, “What am I; what the hell are you?!” Her eyes took his appearance in again, “Well, that’s a stupid question! How many normal people can—can—You’re green! Why are you green?!”

In all fairness, it was like three in the morning.

“You shouldn’t be able to see me in my natural form!” He insisted, completely ignoring the gun that she was very seriously considering using by that point.

“What are you? Are you--? What? What are you?”

“I am J’onn,” he told her, the syllables flowing over her ear like rainwater. On the surface she heard his name which had an almost musical lilt to it, like the French pronunciation of ‘Jean’, but there was more there, more than words, more than *sound*. “J’onn J’onzz; I am Ma’aleca’andran.”

She had no way of describing it, but it was as though his name encapsulated more than a simple designation but his entire identity. Without even thinking about it, she found herself dropping her weapon, suddenly feeling much more calm.

It was as though something in his name told her that this was a good man and that he wouldn’t hurt her.

Well, alien or…something.

“J’onn,” she repeated, the name feeling like the fizz of Pop Rocks against her tongue as her eardrums buzzed at the sounds she was creating from deep within her chest.

J’onn’s features stilled and a profound silence washed over them both. He stared at her, “What are you?” He whispered.

She shook off the queer feeling that had stolen over her and shakily put her weapon back in her bag, “I’m nothing.” She tilted her head slightly, “I mean, I’m not nothing, I’m a person; just a normal person. Normal human...person.”

“Where are you from?” He asked her intently.

“Here, Gotham,” she said nervously. “Well, I mean, originally I’m from Las Vegas but I moved to Gotham when I was a baby, then I lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts for a while for college. MIT,” she shrugged, “Then Starling City and now…” she cleared her throat, “here again. Um, where is…?” She gestured a bit helplessly.

“Ma’aleca’andra,” he supplied.

“Mall alekka andra,” she repeated.

“Ma’aleca’andra,” he corrected her.
“And I’m assuming that Ma’aleca’andra,” she said carefully, “isn’t near here.”

“It is a planet your people know as ‘Mars’.”

She squinted at him slightly and licked her lips nervously, “So you…?” she gestured in his general direction, “are a…?”

“Martian.”

“And you’re green,” she muttered. “Why does that feel like a really bad cliché; like the kind of thing people should be tweeting about angrily while posting protest gifs on Tumblr? Of course, you aren’t a little green Martian, you’re a big green Martian. Like really, really…big.” She stared at him, “Not huge but definitely above average. That…didn’t sound dirty did it?” She cringed. “Because sometimes when I’m nervous or when I’m completely wigged out by something, like, say, meeting a big green Martian, I say things in a very dirty way, but I assure you, I do not want to test out whatever kind of Martian, um, things or—” she paused, “Not that you have two *things* or anything. Do you have two…?” She closed her eyes in a pained expression, “I am not making this any easier on myself, am I? You know what, never mind.”

“I am physiologically similar to a human male when I choose to be,” he told her calmly, “Although my people have very little need for sex organs when not in the process of copulation or waste elimination. However, for all intents and purposes, I am male.”

“Good to know,” she nodded, her head still swimming slightly over the fact that his sex organs were ‘optional’, which is why it took her a tick to catch her unintentional verbal gaffe. As soon as she realized how it must have sounded, she hastened to explain, “Not that I want to, you know; it just helps with the whole correct pronoun thing.”

He looked at her curiously, “And you?”

“I’m a girl. Woman. Female,” she said quickly. “A female woman. Person. I have girl parts that aren’t optional as in I am a person who is…” she took in a sharp breath, “female. And I am embarrassing myself so badly right now,” she muttered, smoothing her hand over her hair.

“No, I mean what planet are you from?” He asked carefully.

“Earth,” she said slowly.

“Which one?”

Uh, okay…“This…Earth; why?”

“Are you certain of that?”

“The state of Nevada is,” she told him carefully.

“And the year?”

“The year I was born or the year it is now?” She asked in confusion.

“The year from whence you originated. Specifically the century.”

Huh, that was a weird way of putting it, “Um, the last one; specifically twenty-three years ago.” She paused, “Well, I’ll be twenty-four on July 24th so…” she did a quick calculation in her head, “twenty-three years, six months, and nineteen days.”
He frowned, “And you aren’t a meta-human?”

“You aren’t the first person to ask me that this week but I’m going to go with what I told them and say, ‘no’.” She took a centering breath. Get a grip, get a grip, she repeated over and over in her head. She could handle this. It was a nice friendly alien, no biggie. “Okay,” she said looking around the hallway, “Even though there are no neighbors or anything to worry about, we should still probably take this inside.” She turned to enter the code into the keypad and paused, turning to look at him suspiciously, “Wait, you aren’t a bee alien, are you?”

“A bee alien?” He repeated quizzically.

“You know, a bee alien,” she said slowly. “I don’t know what their real name is but they’re kind of like, um, Emerald Wasp Parasitic Zombie Aliens who suck out your consciousness. I mean, not that I think you are one,” she hurried to say, “but I had to ask because of the whole…” she gestured towards his person. “Not that I’m…um, racially profiling you for being green, I swear; it’s just that I don’t know a lot about,” she cleared her throat, “bee aliens. I’m sure there are good bee aliens, too, I’m just not familiar enough to…um…So are you? A bee alien?” She asked painfully.

“I don’t believe so, no,” he said, placing his hands in the pockets of his dark leather jacket and giving her an odd look.

“Okay,” she turned nodding to herself. “Okay, that’s…that’s good,” she repeated, then entered in the passcode and motioned for him to follow. As soon as the door opened they were met by Ace who immediately went into a protective stance, baring his teeth and growling low in his throat at J’onn.

“Oh, uh, forgot about the dog. Get down, Ace!”

The dog didn’t appear eager to obey however as he slowly advanced on the stranger, every muscle in his body tensed for a fight.

J’onn, rather than backing away or appearing nervous, merely looked down at the animal and a cool, misty, almost refreshing feeling washed over her like dew drops clinging to her skin. Ace whined then yawned and sat down on his haunches before pawing the air in front of J’onn as he tilted his head comically.

J’onn smiled at him and stroked his long emerald fingers over his dark fur.

“What was that?” Felicity said with a frown.

“I merely communicated to him that I mean you no harm,” he said in the almost impossibly deep baritone.

“You talked to my dog?” She blinked.

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” he told her. “Although they are considered by your people to be of a lesser species, canines are sentient. However, they communicate more in terms of emotion rather than cognizant thought or language. Even so, it was simple enough to communicate to him though an empathic wave what my intentions were and to receive his own response in turn.”

“So you’re…telepathic?” He nodded. “Okay, so what did he say?” She asked numbly.

“Many things,” he said with a slight smile as he continued to pat the dog. “Communicating emotion is very nearly instantaneous. It is far less time consuming than thought speech, as emotions are processed faster than other types of stimulus due to the fact that the amygdala acts before any possible direction from the neocortex can be received. In just a fraction of a second one may have an entire ‘conversation’. It’s actually quite…soothing to the nerves.”
Yeah, this was turning out to be far and away the weirdest conversation she’d ever had and, considering the life she’d led so far, that was saying a lot. She stared down at Ace and frowned, “So what did he, um…share with you?”

“First he asked my intentions and warned me that, should I mean you harm, he would not hesitate to protect his pack, meaning you,” he said looking up at her. “After I communicated my intentions he then welcomed me into his territory with the understanding that I do no harm, the terms of which I happily accepted. He also ‘spoke’ of you,” he added.

“He did?” She said in surprise.

He nodded, “He used very complex imagery to describe you; I was quite surprised. The emotions were all very warm and protective, but the images…” his smile widened. “Dogs do not usually communicate so; the fact that he chose to do so with you is rather fascinating.”

“He didn’t, um, show pictures of me naked or anything, did he?” She asked flushing.

If he did, then she was kicking the dog out of the room when she got into the shower from that point on and she definitely wasn’t letting him stay in the room while she and Bruce were having sex.

Not that she was planning on doing that anyway. Even if dogs couldn’t talk to tall green aliens and this whole night was some kind of weird hallucination brought on by caffeine withdrawal, it just seemed…wrong. Plus, he’d probably want to stare and sniff at things, maybe even attempt to jump on the bed right in the middle and, just no. No, she couldn’t handle that much damage to both his psyche and her own. She already had enough on her plate what with the Martian in her foyer, the bodysnatching bee aliens, her complicated love life, and, yeah, her talking dog of all of two days who had already seen her naked on more than one occasion.

“No,” J’onn assured her, sounding amused. “Certain images connote certain feelings. Food, touching, companionship, grooming; these things all mean affection. Sharing a sleeping place, exchanging warmth; this is trust and acceptance within the pack. These things are normal but he also showed me other images and emotions that he specifically used to signify you, something dogs do not normally do in my experience. The pack is a whole, not an individual. Even when the pack is merely the dog and one other, they are still represented as a pack consisting of two; two halves of a whole. For you he used imagery outside of the pack experience and the emotions and memories he chose to assign to you as an individual were…” he paused, his head tilted slightly to the right as if searching for the correct word, “atypical,” he said at last. “He showed me colors, which is uncommon because dogs have a limited knowledge of the color spectrum. For you he assigned the color ‘bright yellow’ and showed me the sun, allowed me to feel the heat of it as it was absorbed into his fur. He allowed me to smell the flowers, grass, and earth as he experiences them and a memory of running across a hillside as he chased birds while playing with a boy that I did not recognize.”

Damian, she thought sadly, coming up to stroke her hand down his back in comfort. Ace looked back at her and panted happily, his tongue lolling out of his mouth in a silly grin, “What does all that mean?”

“No,” J’onn assured her, sounding amused. “Certain images connote certain feelings. Food, touching, companionship, grooming; these things all mean affection. Sharing a sleeping place, exchanging warmth; this is trust and acceptance within the pack. These things are normal but he also showed me other images and emotions that he specifically used to signify you, something dogs do not normally do in my experience. The pack is a whole, not an individual. Even when the pack is merely the dog and one other, they are still represented as a pack consisting of two; two halves of a whole. For you he used imagery outside of the pack experience and the emotions and memories he chose to assign to you as an individual were…” he paused, his head tilted slightly to the right as if searching for the correct word, “atypical,” he said at last. “He showed me colors, which is uncommon because dogs have a limited knowledge of the color spectrum. For you he assigned the color ‘bright yellow’ and showed me the sun, allowed me to feel the heat of it as it was absorbed into his fur. He allowed me to smell the flowers, grass, and earth as he experiences them and a memory of running across a hillside as he chased birds while playing with a boy that I did not recognize.”

Felicity looked up at him in surprise, “I’ve heard that name before. Twice, I’ve heard it twice,” her brow furrowed and she glanced down at Ace again then back up to J’onn, “What does ‘Bright Lady’ mean?”

“It is his name for you,” he told her. “There can be no true translation for it in the limited human context of language but, roughly speaking, he calls you ‘Summer Joy Woman’ or ‘Bright Lady’.”

“I do not know,” J’onn said quietly. “Just as I do not know how you can see me in my true form or
how you do any of the other things I have seen you do if you are neither alien nor meta-human. Who are you really, Director Starling?"

She didn’t answer him because, at that moment, she honestly wasn’t sure anymore.

*\?/?\?/*\?/*\?/*\?

His phone vibrated again as he landed lightly on the rooftop of his hotel. He always made sure to get the penthouse suite; not just because it was usually the most comfortable, but also for convenience sake. It helped also that he happened to own this particular hotel as well as many others. The Wayne family began their fortune buying and selling real estate and he owned homes, apartments, and hotels in just about every major city in the world both in his name and in many of his aliases.

Because Bruce owned this hotel, he had access to the security system so he knew Lucius had already looped the rooftop camera feeds. It was for that reason that he felt comfortable enough to remove his encrypted phone from his belt and check his messages.

It was a text from Dick.

//All clear. Baby back in the crib.//

He felt himself relax slightly. He immediately dialed her number and waited for her to pick up.

//Um, hi Bruce!/ She said in a voice that was almost too bright.

“What’s wrong?” He asked immediately.

//Nothing.//

“You’re lying. Is someone there? Are you alright?” He asked, jaw clenched.

//Bruce, nothing’s wrong, I just…// she sighed, //It’s been a really long night and I’m still feeling a bit tense.//

“Are you sure?” He asked carefully.

//I’m safe, I’m home, I’m sure,// she said with a hint of aggravation. //Now when are you coming home? Soon I hope?//

“I should be there by tomorrow morning, bright and early. How did everything go at Orbital?”

//Not…great,// she admitted.

He frowned, “Are you okay?”

//I told you, I’m fine, but the mission wasn’t exactly successful,/ she admitted. //The team made it out okay and I did my job, but…// she made a dissatisfied noise. //It was just a really shitty night and a lot of stuff happened but I’ll fill you in when you get here.//

“I can…sympathize.” He grimaced, “Mallory’s dead.”

Silence.

His brows drew together under the cowl in consternation, “Did you hear what I said?”

//Yeah, I already heard,// she admitted reluctantly.
“From who?” He demanded.

//Miranda,// she told him.

“Is she the one who had him killed?” He asked grimly.

//Not…not according to her but, like I said, we have a lot to talk about when you get home.//

“Damn it, Felicity,” he growled in frustration.

//Fine, you want to know what she told me?//

“Yes,” he bit out.

//Long story short: time traveling bee aliens were trying to give us super powers so they could turn us into bee zombies but their space ship blew up and now immortal Amazons are pissed off and joined up with Orbital in order to stop Lex Luthor and Amanda Waller from using alien bee pollen to control our minds. Oh and, FYI, not only can the dog talk now, but there’s a Martian in our kitchen. A big green Martian. His name is J’onn and we were just sitting down to have a snack when you called. Happy now?//

“Seriously, what did she tell you?”

Her voice lowered, //I’m not having this discussion with you, Bruce; not over the phone, so you can either get your ass home or figure it out for yourself because all I want to do after the fucked up night I’ve had is eat something, take a goddamn bath, and go to bed!//

“Fine,” he said tersely.

//Good!/\n
“I’ll be home in a little while, but then I expect some real answers, understood?” He told her sharply.

//Looking forward to it.//

*click*

“Goodnight, Baby; I lo--” he frowned, “Baby?”

He looked down at the phone with a sinking feeling.

“Alien bee zombies and Martians at the kitchen table,” he muttered as he dialed Alfred. “Great,”

//Is everything alright, sir?//

“Somehow I doubt it,” he said irritably. “I need you to call Kathryn Kane and ask her to open Killinger’s tonight and then I need you to go over there and pick up a few things. I’ll email her the list so all you need do is pick it up.”

//Tonight, sir? As in…?//

“Now.”

//I’m not sure she can, sir. It’s the middle of the night--//

“I know what time it is, Alfred, but Kate owes me one and this is me calling in that favor.”
May I ask why, sir?//

He exhaled roughly, “Because I don’t know of any twenty-four hour florists in Gotham, that’s why.”

Ah. I take it this is for Miss Felicity then, sir?//

“You take it correctly,” he said crossly. “Also, let her know that we’ll need gift wrapping services as well and that I’ll be happy to triple the commission and cover the overtime for whomever opens the store for you so long as it’s done before we land in the morning. They can just charge it to my account.”

And what time will that be, sir?//

“We’ll be leaving in less than half an hour so with the time difference we’ll be there by five.”

I’ll be sure to call Ms. Kane immediately then.//

“Thank you.”

Felicity made a noise of aggravation and put her phone down on the counter as she finished making the coffee. She peeked over at J’onn who was wandering around the kitchen and looking around with interest, “Are you hungry? I have some deli in the fridge.”

He turned to her and smiled slightly, “I appreciate the offer but I do not consume flesh.”

Really? She said in surprise. “For health reasons or…?”

“No, I suppose if I were forced to I could consume flesh, but I choose not to,” he told her, his fingers ghosting over Ace’s head as the dog had been avidly interested in him since their ‘conversation’ by the door. “Among my abilities is that I can sense psychic resonance and, from time to time, I am able to get faint impressions from the deceased, therefore—”

Oh-okay, yeah,” she said stopping him right there because she had a feeling that if he finished that sentence she’d never be able to eat another cheeseburger again and she really, really liked burgers. “So you’re a vegan?”

“No, not strictly speaking,” he told her. “I consume dairy products as well as unfertilized eggs as they are a byproduct of the being and not beings unto themselves.”

“Fish?” She asked, just for curiosity’s sake.

“No, I do not consume fish,” he told her. “I thought of trying it once when I first arrived on your world. I saw an advertisement for something called ‘tuna casserole’ that looked rather interesting. However, I’d never communicated with a tuna so I was unsure of their level of sentience. I went into one of your ‘pet shops’ out of curiosity and spoke to some goldfish then decided that, although their sentience was minimal, it would be best not to risk it.”

“You…talked to a goldfish?” She asked slowly. “And what did it say?”

Because, what the hell.

“Very little,” he said with a frown. “Mostly it was just a great feeling of dissatisfaction at the amount of food being sprinkled within the tank followed by a great deal of displeasure because another fish was in the cave it liked to hide in. Actually, most of the fish were perpetually annoyed; it was all
rather repetitive and tiresome.”

She looked at him blankly, trying desperately to come up with something, anything to say, “Uh, well, the tuna on the little package is always smiling.”

What the serious fuck is wrong with me? She thought with a pained expression.

His brow furrowed, “Perhaps it may have just been the fish in that particular store but, for the most part, fish don’t strike me as a particularly cheerful species as a whole; at least not the ones kept in small tanks. I haven’t spent enough time in your planet’s oceans to either prove or disprove that hypothesis, however.”

“A grumpy goldfish,” she muttered. “Okay.” She glanced at her fridge. She had been really looking forward to a turkey sandwich but that wasn’t happening; especially not if J’onn was going to be haunted by the ghost of the dead turkey as a result. “Um…cookies and milk?” She suggested.

“That would be quite agreeable, thank you.”

She went to the cabinet and pulled out two glasses, “So how long have you been on Earth?” She stopped for a moment, “That was one of my weirder conversation starters and, boy howdy, can I come up with some doozies.” She turned to look at J’onn who was now sitting at her kitchen table with an amused look on his face.

“Many years,” he told her.

“Many years,” she repeated under her breath as she reached in the fridge for some milk and poured it in both glasses, “You wouldn’t have happened to have crash landed in Roswell, New Mexico during the fifties by any chance?”

“No,” he told her with a chuckle. “It was Middleton, Colorado actually, and I didn’t crash land; I was accidentally transported here through one of your Earth scientist’s experiments.”

“Oh,” she said handing him his glass and putting down her own before reaching for the box of Chocos on the counter.

“Although I did come here in the fifties,” he told her. “1955 to be precise.”

“Well, that’s something anyway,” she said, clearing her throat and setting the cookies near him. She went to the cabinet for a jar of sunflower butter then got a spoon and some jam from the fridge as she tried to think of what else to ask.

It was kind of annoying that, here she was, a scientist and a scifi fan with a real live Martian in her kitchen, and yet she was totally blanking out.

Oh, except for when she was talking about clinically depressed goldfish, talking dogs, and whether or not it’s okay to eat sentient tuna as long as Charlie was smiling on the package.

It was days like this when she seriously contemplated taking up smoking, if for no other reason than to have something to jam in her mouth so she could shut the hell up and die sooner.

She grabbed the wheat bread and sat down at the table across from him, “If you want a sandwich I have plenty,” she told him. “I’m allergic to nuts so I don’t have any peanut butter in the house but the sunbutter is pretty good, too. At least from what people have told me since I can’t really remember what peanut butter tastes like anymore.”
“I have had your peanut butter as well as other varieties of protein laden sandwich spreads; I enjoy them very much,” he said, opening up the bag and looking at one of the cookies dubiously.

“So do you want a sandwich?”

“Not quite yet, but perhaps later,” he told her, sniffing the cookie carefully.

“It’s a Choco,” she told him as she opened up the bread and plopped two slices on the plate, “It’s like an Oreo only better.”

“Hmm,” he said uncertainly. “I don’t normally consume overly sweetened things but the scent of it is…intriguing. I will admit.”

“Are you a diabetic or…?” She asked curiously as she dug out a big spoonful of the pale golden tan spread and smeared it on the wheat bread.

“No, but the scientist I first came into contact with was adamant that I not endanger my health by consuming chemical laden foods and sugar,” he told her. “He prescribed a strict diet and I have followed it religiously for many years now. I mostly consume vegetable matter and fruit, as well as legumes, although I do enjoy breads high in fiber, whole wheat pasta, and brown rice as per Dr. Erdel’s instructions. I also sometimes enjoy a bit of organic honey as a special treat in my tea but only very rarely.” he added.

“He was probably right,” she shrugged as she dug into the blueberry jam and glopped that on as well. “Unfortunately, junk is usually easier to come by when you’re on the go all the time.”

He frowned slightly as he looked at the thickly applied jam and sunbutter, “I take it you are not concerned about your sugar intake?”

She had just taken a healthy bite of her sandwich so she had to hold up a finger as she chewed then took a sip of milk to wash down the remnants stuck to the roof of her mouth, “Hmm, other than a fondness for cheeseburgers, I eat pretty healthy actually, but I do indulge my sweet tooth now and then. However, this jam is sweetened with fruit juice instead of sugar and the sunbutter is pretty healthy as well.” She glanced at the cookie in his hand, “You know, I don’t think one cookie will hurt you. I’m sure even your doctor friend had the occasional treat.”

“I…,” he said thoughtfully then looked at the cookie once more as if trying to decide what to do with it, “I have seen advertising for foodstuffs similar to this and there appears to be some sort of ritual to their consumption but I don’t quite recall what it involves. Do I place it in the milk, or…?”

“You can; I like dipping mine in milk or coffee until it gets a little mushy. Some people who prefer the crunch twist them apart and eat the middle first then eat the cookie part, but if I were you I’d eat it the more traditional way before going that route,” she suggested. “Just take a bite and decide from there.”

He nodded slightly before putting the cookie in his mouth and chewing. A look of sublime pleasure crossed his face and he smiled broadly.

“Told you they were good. You know, some people say they’re just knock off Oreos but I think they’re—” she stopped as she watched J’onn grab several from the box and begin shoving them in his face, one right after the other, “better. You might want to slow down,” she suggested carefully as he pulled the box closer to him and began eating them two at a time, “You wouldn’t want to… choke.”

He stopped and looked at her, “Choke?” He garbled out, mouth full.
“Just-just drink some milk,” she suggested with a wince.

He reached for his milk and chugged it down in a matter of seconds. He put it down, looking completely blissed out, “May I have some more milk and another box of the Chocos?”

“Sure, but you still have a---” she watched as he continued to steadily put away the cookies, “Yeah, I think we might have another box somewhere.”

She got up and walked over to the fridge, placing the milk on the table, then went through the cabinets for another box of cookies, “You know, if you’re hungry I have some leftover fruit salad and some cheese. Oh, and I think I might have some pasta we can make up real quick. We could boil some eggs, maybe toss in some broccoli and parmesan cheese, along with some carrots? Ooh, and maybe some baby spinach! We can do a Pasta Primavera kind of thing. I actually wouldn’t mind trying some of that myself.” She found the extra box of cookies she’d hidden from Laurel and turned to face him. “Oh.”

“Just Chocos,” he said his mouth full as cookie crumbs fell on the table. He reached for the milk and took off the cap then began to drink straight from the jug.

“Oh, uh…” she watched, stepping toward him in alarm as the almost full gallon of milk swiftly began to disappear into his gullet. “You—you can’t drink milk that fast. You’re going to be sick.”

“More Chocos?” He asked hopefully, putting it down then reached for the bag in her hands and immediately tore it open. He began to shovel the cookies in his mouth again.

“Oh wow, I really have no idea what to do in this situation,” she muttered faintly as she watched him eat the cookies with both hands.

“More Chocos?” He garbled again less than a minute later, the second bag completely empty.

“Um, I think we’re out.”

“What?” He asked crestfallen. “Out?” He repeated, his voice dripping with devastation. “There’s no more?”

He looked so close to tears that Felicity began to panic a little, “Let me—let me look again,” she said, trying to calm him down.

As she tried looking for another box of cookies he began drinking the milk again, swaying slightly in his chair, “Can we get more?” He asked, slurring his words slightly.

“What?” She asked, turning to him.

His outer eyelids were at half-mast as he clutched the nearly empty milk carton to his chest, “If we’re out can we get…get some more?” He asked her.

“Yeah, sure,” she told him, “Let me, um, let me make a quick phone call and we’ll get you some more…cookies.”

“Chocos!” He said slightly belligerently. “They—” he hiccupped, “They got—have—have got to be Chocos!”

“Okay, Chocos it is,” she promised him as she began to dial the first number she could think of which was Laurel’s.
“And milk!” He added, now swaying on the chair like a buoy in choppy waters. “Lots of milk!”

//Hey Felicity, what’s up?//

The minute the phone picked up on the other end, Felicity popped out of her chair and began to speak, “Laurel, oh thank God!”

//What’s wrong?// She asked in concern.

“Yes, so much is wrong right now,” She said quietly as she moved to the counter and watched as J’onn began to stare at the dog and giggle drunkenly. “Like a lot; a lot is wrong right now and, frankly, I don’t know if I can handle much more of this.”

//What’s going on? What’s happening?// Laurel said quickly.

She heard Renee’s voice in the background, //Is she okay?//

“I need you to…come home,” she said slowly. “Just—just—I just need you to come home. Please.”

//Are you under attack?// The other woman demanded tersely.

//Fuck!// Renee cursed, and she could hear the squeal of tires in the background.

“No!” She said quickly, “But there is something of a situation,” she swallowed nervously. “Um, and I would really appreciate it if you could come home, like really, um, now, now would be good, but first I need to you pick something up. A few things actually.”

//What do you need; weapons, bullets? I’ll call in the troops, just hang on!// Renee told her. Her voice much clearer than it had been meaning Laurel had them connected to the Bluetooth.

“No, it’s not that kind of situation,” she said as calmly as she could manage. “It is, uhhh, it’s…” she blew out a harsh breath, “Fuck, I don’t know.”

//Just tell us what you need,// Laurel told her.

“Well,” she said, running her hand over her hair as J’onn sort of slid onto the floor so he could get on his hands and knees. He then crawled over to a very happy looking Ace and began to bark.

//What is that? Is someone there with you?// Renee demanded.

“Yes…” she said watching as Ace began to lick J’onn’s face excitedly. “I need you to stop by the store and pick up some more milk and Chocos. Like a gallon, or two…” She looked at J’onn, “Four gallons maybe?”

//Why do you need four gallons of milk?// Laurel asked incredulously.

“I just do,” she told her. “Call it a…craving.”

//Are you pregnant?// The other woman asked in surprise.

“No! Just…just please bring the milk,” she rubbed the bridge of her nose and tried to suppress a shudder of disgust as J’onn opened his mouth and the dog began licking at his teeth, “Ugh, and cookies,” she said tightly, “lots of cookies—and also a spare toothbrush.”

“Not cookies; Chocos! Lots of Chocos!” J’onn shouted gleefully as he hugged the dog to his chest
and began licking him back with a very, very, very long tongue.

//Who the hell is that?// Renee demanded.

“oh my god, oh my god, oh my god…” she said over and over again as she desperately tried not to completely lose it.

//What’s going on?// Laurel asked. //Felicity, who was that?//


//Oh my God, are you having sex right now?// Laurel asked, outraged.

“Noooo…” She watched as J’onn’s tongue, which had to be at least three feet long with a bulbous tip like a frog’s, began stroking over the dog’s ears and face, “Eugh! No, no, no sex; just help. Please! Please! I need help. Bring milk! Bring cookies! Lots-lots of cookies! Ooh god, he’s licking the dog! He’s licking the dog! Oh my god, he’s licking the dog!”

//Who’s licking the dog? What are you talking about?// Laurel demanded.

//Have you been drinking?// Renee asked angrily.

“No, but bring alcohol, too! Or—or bleach! Listerine! I don’t know!” She sobbed. “I think he’s going to eat my dog!”

//What?// Both women shouted at the same time.

“He—he said he wouldn’t eat the dog, but he’s licking the dog!” She cried. “And I don’t know what to do!”

//I’m calling Ollie.// Laurel said. //Give me your phone!/!

//What the hell is going on?// Renee shouted, //Who’s eating the dog?!!//

“It’s an alien!” She shouted back, her skin breaking out in goosebumps and J’onn flopped over on his back and began to giggle as Ace crawled onto his chest and began to lick him all over, “He stopped licking him but now I’m worried that something really bad is about to happen because—because I think—um—” she watched as J’onn began to take off his clothes.

“I cast off the human trappings!” He slurred, sitting up then tossing his jacket across the room before pulling off his sweater.

“I don’t know—I don’t know what’s happening!” Felicity sobbed shaking her head. “I don’t know! I need milk and cookies! Please God, just bring the milk and cookies!”

//I don’t know what’s happening but she’s freaking the fuck out!/! She heard Laurel yell. //Just get your ass over there, now! We’re pulling into the parking structure!//

J’onn pulled off his pants and Felicity immediately turned away, shouting, “Please don’t have sex with my dog!”

“I cast off the soc-- *hic* societal conventions of humanity and live as a Ma’aleca’andran!” J’onn shouted joyfully.

“Oh God, don’t, don’t, don’t, please don’t…” She said over and over again.
We’re almost there! Renee shouted breathlessly.

Felicity’s breath began to hitch and sob, “We need cookies! We need cookies! He’s naked! We need cookies!”

I don’t know! She heard Laurel shout in the background, Right now she’s just shouting about cookies and naked people! That she needs lots and lots of cookies! No, I don’t know why she needs the cookies; all I know is that she’s freaking out and Felicity doesn’t freak out so it’s freaking me out! Just get here now!

She heard the front door burst open and wept in relief as the heavy footsteps of Renee and Laurel ran towards her, “Help! We need cookies before he does something to the dog!”

“What the hell?!” Renee shouted, her gun at the ready as she burst into the kitchen.

Felicity turned to look and stared at J’onn who was naked and spinning around in circles as he whooped in joy, along with Ace who was jumping up on his back legs beside him as he began to bark happily.

“Did you bring the cookies?” She warbled.

“What?!” Laurel said, coming behind Renee and taking in the scene.

“Are you high?!” Renee asked angrily as she rounded on her.

“No!” Felicity sniffled, “I don’t think so!”

“Is that… Alice?” Laurel asked, head tilted in amusement as J’onn bent over to try to stand on his head.

Felicity slapped her hands over her eyes and spun on her heels because, even in her near hysterical state, she just really didn’t want to see that.

“Why the hell is there a drunk naked woman doing a handstand in your kitchen?” Renee demanded, pointing in the alien’s general direction.

Felicity goggled at her, “What?”

At that moment, Oliver, Dick, and Luke burst into the kitchen behind them.

“What’s going—?!” Oliver stood stock still, his mouth open in shock.

Dick did a double take and slowly lowered his collapsible escrima sticks, “Uhh…”

J’onn fell over and clutched his stomach, laughing uproariously as he rolled around on the floor next to the dog who started licking him again.

“Who’s the hot naked chick?” Luke asked, his head tilted as he craned his neck to get a better view.

“What?” Felicity said again.

“The naked woman,” Renee said slowly. “The one currently sliding her bare ass all over the kitchen floor.”

She blinked, “What?”
“And is she seeing anybody?” Luke asked as he moved forward a bit.

“What?” She said again because, seriously.

“Felicity!” Oliver said sharply, putting down his bow, and coming over to put his hands on her shoulders, “Listen very carefully; who is the woman on the floor and what is going on?”

She turned to look at J’onn, then the group, then back at J’onn again, “I’m sorry, I don’t understand the question,” she said tremulously.

“Okay,” Oliver sighed then turned to Luke, “Can you go get a blanket or a robe or something for… whoever that is, please?”


“Wow, she is…really naked,” Dick said faintly.

“And bendy,” Luke said, tilting his head further as J’onn tried to do another handstand.

Renee stepped in front of them, “Alright, both of you out!”

Luke’s face fell, “But--”

“Out now!” She said firmly.

“Felicity, why is Alice naked and why is she in your apartment?” Laurel asked her carefully as Renee shoved Luke and Dick out of the room.

“That’s not Alice!” She said insistently, “Well, it is Alice but it’s also J’onn!” She ran her hand over her hair, “Actually, it’s mostly J’onn; 100% J’onn because there is no Alice!”

“Who’s Jean?” Laurel frowned.

“J’onn! J’onn! J’onn is an alien!” Felicity said stridently, “A very naked, very male alien! How are you not seeing the big green naked alien in the middle of the kitchen floor?”

“Wait, did she just say that chick is an alien?” Luke asked peeking his head back in the door.

“Out!” Renee ordered. “Whoever this girl is she doesn’t need you guys ogling her!”

“There is no girl!” Felicity said insistently, “That’s J’onn! *He* is J’onn, and *he* is an alien!”

Oliver looked at her probingly, “Felicity, were you injected or did you drink something; maybe someone used a gas on you like Vertigo or…?”

“I’m not--!” She growled, forgetting her fear for a moment and striding over to J’onn who was now sitting up with a drunken smirk as he snickered for no reason other than the fact that he was naked. “This.” She said pointing at him, “Is J’onn! J’onn is an alien! He’s from Mars and he’s green! How is it you people can’t seem to see that?!”

“Hello,” He said grinning broadly, “did you *hic* bring more Chocos?”

“Felicity, that’s Alice,” Laurel said carefully. “You know, the tech from Orbital?”

“No!” She told her then turned to Renee, “You—you see him, right?”
“Sweetie, all I see is a naked woman who seems to think ‘drunken yoga’ is a thing,” the other woman said flatly.

“Oliver?” She asked unsteadily, “You see him, right?”

“Felicity, all I see is some girl; there is no alien,” he said calmly. “You need to calm down and take a breath; you’re imagining things.”

“I’m so confused right now,” Felicity said tearfully. “Why can’t any of you see him?”

“Tha’s what I was telling you,” J’onn slurred happily. “I dunno why but you…” he pointed to her as he drew out the vowel sounds, “are diff’rent.”

“I don’t know what’s going on or what happened but whatever you think you’re seeing is just a hallucination so I need you to concentrate,” he rested his hand on Felicity’s cheek and looked into her eyes. “What happened to you and, um…?”

“J’onn!” She told him.

“J’onn,” he said slowly. The way he said it wasn’t right, but it was close; more of a soft buzzing ‘J’, a pause, then ‘Ahn’. “What happened to you and J’onn?”

“I don’t know,” she said shakily, “We were just talking and then I was hungry. I asked him if he was hungry, so I gave him some cookies and milk—”

“Chocos!” J’onn howled. “More Chocos!”

“And then he started licking the dog…” she hyperventilated, “and it was big…”

“Maybe it’s low blood sugar?” Laurel suggested to Oliver.

“Try to find some cookies or juice or something,” he told her and Laurel nodded and began to go through the cabinets. “Okay, so you ate the cookies; then what?”

“I told you; he licked the dog!” She said angrily. “With a…big frog tongue!”

“With a…big frog tongue,” he repeated slowly. “Felicity…”

“Hey,” Dick said, peeking his head back in, “I brought a blanket.”

Renee snatched the blanket from him and walked over to the girl to cover her up.

“No!” J’onn said scrambling away from her, “Naked!” He jumped to his feet and spun once more, “As the Children of C’eridyall were meant to be!”

“The Children of who?” Felicity asked, her attention drawn back to J’onn which was unfortunate because she caught an eyeful of full frontal. Her jaw dropped, “What happened to your penis?!” She asked in alarm, her eyes sweeping the floor.

For a second there she panicked because he was as smooth as a Ken doll down there and, honestly, at that point, she kind of thought it might have somehow fallen off.

Later, she would remember that moment as a definite low point to her existence but, in her defense, the only thing more upsetting than seeing a green alien penis at that point, was not seeing a green alien penis.
“Her…penis?” Oliver repeated slowly.

“Did she just say that naked chick had a penis?” Luke asked, shoving his way in with Dick close behind.

“Out!” Renee growled.

“I told you my people only need it for cop-- *hic* --ulation,” he said with a blissed out grin. “Have you found any more Chocos yet?”

“So that means—oh thank God!” She said, placing her hand over her rapidly beating heart. “I thought you were going to do something to the dog.”

“Wait, did she just say she *did* have a penis only it was detachable?” Dick asked staring at Renee.

“Why the hell are you asking me?” She growled.

Dick gave her an uncertain look, “I just figured, you know…”

“Know what?” She asked flatly.

“You know,” Luke said off-handedly, “Detachable hardware, naked lesbian chick, you being a lesbian…”

“Get the fuck out,” she told both of them. “Out; before I kick both of your asses!”

“What did you think I was going to do to the dog?” J’onn asked, swaying slightly with a frown.

“Well,” she flushed with embarrassment, “First I thought you were going to eat him and then when you got all, um, naked…” she bit her bottom lip and cringed.

“You thought I wanted to copulate with the dog?” He asked with a hint of belligerence.

“I’m sorry,” she flustered. “I’m so, so sorry! I’m so embarrassed!”

J’onn looked at the dog then back at her, “Not that he isn’t a very attractive dog but our two species aren’t really compatible sexually.” He said with a furrowed brow. “Also, we’ve only just met and that sort of thing would be highly inappropriate not to mention the fact that Ace has had his gonads surgically removed and I prefer to copulate only with beings that belong to much higher evolved species.”

“I am so very sorry,” she apologized again, her face on fire. “I just—I wasn’t thinking and I panicked.”

“Why did you think I was going to eat him?” He frowned again, seeming to sober up slightly.

“Well, see,” she cleared her throat, “Um, the whole…” she pointed to her mouth.

He blinked, “Pardon?”

“The…tongue thing,” she muttered.

“Oh,” he said, raising one eyeridge, “Ace was expressing his welcome into the pack by grooming me so I sought to return the courtesy.”

“Okay,” Felicity breathed with a pained expression.
Luke leaned in towards Dick, “Did she just say she licked the dog?”

Even Renee did a double take at that one, “Wow, I’ve been on a few benders in my time but…yeah, never got drunk enough to lick a dog.” She paused, “Slept with a few after last call but not the kind that actually bark.”

“Really?” Oliver said flatly, eyeing her with a hint of disapproval.

“Shove it, Mr. GreenJeans; like you haven’t had a few Coyote Ugly mornings after raving it up and peeing on cop cars,” she scoffed.

“Please, don’t be embarrassed,” J’onn told her. “It was my fault. I was only attempting to be polite,” he expanded. “I apologize if I alarmed you in some way; that was not my intention.”

“No, no,” she said quickly. “You’re fine! It was me, all me; I’m… I’m *so* sorry,” Felicity told him as she cupped her face in her hands. “I’m so embarrassed right now…”

“As I said, your confusion is quite understandable. I confess to feeling a bit alarmed myself; I’ve never exhibited this sort of loss of control before.” J’onn looked down at his unclothed state and reached down for his clothing, “I’m not really sure what came over me.”

“Could you both have been poisoned somehow?” Oliver asked, his eyes averted as J’onn proceeded to dress.

“It’s possible,” J’onn answered, his head tilted slightly in contemplation. “However, I don’t feel ill and I imagine that had we been poisoned there would be some sort of aftereffects. If anything, I feel quite refreshed, almost…euphoric. I still don’t understand why you thought I would eat your companion, however. As I said before, I don’t consume—”

“Found the cookies,” Laurel said, turning to them with the box in her hand.

“Chocos!” The alien exclaimed happily, dropping the pants clutched in his hand. His long bulbous tongue shot out of his mouth, wrapped around the box snatching it out of Laurel’s hand, and brought it to him in less time than it took to blink.

“What the fuck?!” Renee shouted and all of them fell back with a start, their weapons raised and pointed towards the alien.

All of them except Felicity who was still standing next to J’onn, much calmer than she had been the first time, and looked between her companions who were in a state of shock and high alert to her new friend, the frog-tongued Martian who was shoveling in sandwich cookies a handful at a time, “I think I know why Dr. Erdel recommended you stay away from sweets now.”

The only thing more shocking to the rest of them than the large amphibian-like tongue followed shortly thereafter by how quickly J’onn sucked down an entire box of cookies, was when he ‘transformed’ into his true form.

After Felicity managed to calm the rest of them down and got her strange guest to put his clothes back on, J’onn decided the best course of action was to show them his true face. However, other than a build-up of pressure in the back of her skull and the slight hint of white noise buzzing at the edge of her hearing, Felicity couldn’t see anything.

Oliver just stared in stunned silence as Luke blinked, “Um, I think I just found something to top my
“Lion Centaur story,” he said faintly.

“Wow,” Laurel said flatly.

Renee’s jaw dropped, “Holy mother of…”

“Cool,” Dick said with a grin. “You know, I dated an alien once; Koriand’r. She was from a planet called Tamaran,” he nodded.

J’onn offered him a polite nod in return as he sipped the coffee Felicity had made for him, “I’ve heard of Tamaran; it’s in Sector 2828 in the Vega system. It’s a fixed binary system; very beautiful. The people there are supposed to be quite charming and peace loving for the most part as long as they are not being threatened. Their customs are a bit odd though,” he said with a small frown. “My people tended to avoid traveling there as Ma’aleca’andrans mate for life and the Tamaran people have no such concept of monogamy. They tend to view the refusal of copulation as rather rude behavior, in fact. They accept it, of course; they merely find it strange and quite silly. Still, it makes any show of diplomacy rather difficult.”

“Yeah,” Dick said, tightening his lips slightly and glancing up at the ceiling.

“I still can’t believe I was thinking about hitting on a naked dude,” Luke muttered with a hint of chagrin. “A green naked dude.”

Renee turned to Laurel, “Is it wrong that I kind of want someone to take a picture with me and the Martian so I can text it to my brother later?”

“I’ll do it but you have to return the favor ‘cause my dad is totally going to flip his lid,” Laurel chuckled ruefully.

Oliver just stared at J’onn and muttered, “All I know is that Wayne can keep Gotham. Starling has its problems, yeah, but this…this is bullshit.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly, “And now I get to tell Diggle I met an alien; great.”

She looked around the table at their shocked and awed countenances and frowned, “I don’t get it.”

“What?” Oliver asked, glancing up at her.

She looked at J’onn who was sitting closest to her, “You didn’t change; you still look the same as you did earlier.”

“Uh, sweetie, he went from looking like a hot girl to a big green alien dude with glowing red eyes,” Renee said slowly.

“I still have no idea what you guys are talking about,” Felicity said shaking her head in confusion.

“Now I’m confused,” Laurel said with a furrowed brow.

“Your companions are correct; when they first saw me I appeared to be the young human female known as ‘Alice’,” J’onn put down his coffee and sighed, “One of the abilities some of my people, myself included, possess allows us to camouflage ourselves by changing our physicality. While Director Starling could see me in my true form, the rest of you merely saw the identity I used to infiltrate the Orbital offices.”

“That’s so weird,” Laurel said, wrinkling her nose.
J’onn looked in her direction, “Not really; even here on Earth there are many species of birds and mammals who have developed a process called melanogenesis, as well as cold-blooded species classified as Chromatophores who have developed adaptations in order to rapidly camouflage themselves by changing colors in order to blend in with their environment. Not to as great an extent as my people, certainly, but they exist.”

“No, I got that, I just meant hearing you call Felicity ‘Director Starling’ is weird,” she said then smirked as the others frowned at her, “Yeah, like the rest of you weren’t thinking the exact same thing.”

“It…is kind of weird,” Luke admitted reluctantly.

Felicity gave them both a withering glare then turned to J’onn, “Just call me ‘Felicity’ when we aren’t in Orbital. Actually, just call me Felicity whenever.”

“Very well,” he said, nodding his head slightly, “Felicity then.”

“So, this disguise; it’s an illusion?” Oliver asked with a frown. “Then how could Felicity see through it when we couldn’t?”

“It’s not an illusion,” J’onn clarified. “It is a physical change; my physiology is composed of a complex molecular chain that resembles polymer bonds but with the ability to be altered at will. This bio-polymer makes up my entire physicality, including my skin, musculature, internal organs, and skeleton. It is, in comparison to your own physiology, extremely flexible and durable, and can both expand and collapse at will. This ability to shift means I can change color, relative shape and size, and even manipulate my vocal cords so that I can appear more human.”

“So what are you trying to say?” Felicity asked in confusion, “That you were physically Alice this entire time?”

“Yes,” he said simply, “Hence my confusion over how it was that you could ‘see’ me. I also have the ability to render myself completely invisible along the electromagnetic spectrum by activating the carotenoids and pteridines in my skin cells in order to reflect or absorb light, including the infrared and the ultraviolet ranges of the spectrum as I did in the hallway before you spoke to me. Of course, this invisibility does not affect every other sense and I could still be detected by touch, as well as ‘sensed’ by other means such as telepathy, which is why I asked if you were either meta-human or alien in origin.”

“Felicity’s not a meta-human,” Oliver said dryly.

“Are you certain of this?” He asked evenly.

“I’ve been with Felicity around the clock, pretty much 24/7 for the last three and a half years, and she’s never displayed any sort of abilities,” Oliver said confidently. “I think I’d know if she was a meta-human. Trust me, we’ve come across plenty of enhanced humans since the particle accelerator exploded and she’s nothing like them.”

“He’s right,” Felicity shrugged and grimaced wryly, “I don’t have any abilities other than the ability to hack and that wasn’t something that just happened to me overnight. Everything I know how to do was something I trained for and learned the hard way.”

“Perhaps you were born with this extrasensory perception then?” J’onn suggested. “Are you certain that one or both of your parents was not of extraterrestrial descent?”

Luke snorted and Dick grinned broadly.
“I used to accuse her of being an alien baby when we were kids, but no,” her brother answered for her. “Besides, I remember her mom and, other than the albino thing, she was normal.”

“Albino thing?” Renee repeated.

“Your mother was an albino?” J’onn asked with a thoughtful expression.

“She had mild achromatosis; very mild,” Felicity said, flushing slightly. “Most people couldn’t even tell from looking at her. They just thought she was really pale and dyed her hair.”

“Was she quite tall, by any chance?” He asked her.

Luke snorted, “No. In fact, I’m pretty sure she was even shorter than Felicity by an inch or two. I wasn’t that much older than she was when Evie died but I remember that much.”

“He’s right,” Dick said. “I never met Evie but I’ve seen pictures of her standing next Lucius and she couldn’t have been more than 5’2” or 5’3”. Hey wait,” he got up and grabbed one of the tablets on the counter then brought up a browser page. “Her picture is up on the Fine Arts Grant page of the Wayne Foundation.”

He handed the tablet to J’onn who studied it carefully with a thoughtful expression on his face before handing it back.

“Can I see that?” Oliver asked. Felicity watched his expression from the other end of the table as he looked from Evie’s picture to her, “Walter was right; you do look a lot like your mom. Other than the hair, of course.”

Luke smirked, “You’ve never seen her natural hair color then.”

Oliver’s eyes met hers again and she flushed even darker at the sudden flare of heat she saw within his gaze. It was almost as if she could hear the words ‘natural blonde’ coming from his mouth all over again and knew exactly what it was he was thinking about.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat and looked nervously at the table.

Laurel took the tablet from him and scrolled through the page, “I know that painting,” she said tapping on it then showing it to her, “My Happiness? That’s you as a baby, isn’t it? How did I not know that?”

Oliver took the tablet from her again and looked at the painting, his expression softening. He then looked up at Felicity once more, “Your mom was really talented.”

“Thanks,” Felicity said flushing, not daring to meet his eyes directly.

Renee motioned for them to hand it down and looked as well, “Wow, your mom was pretty hot,” she said, her eyebrows raising slightly. “I can definitely tell she’s an albino though.”

“Most people never noticed because she usually wore makeup but not when she was at home or working,” Felicity explained. “If that’s the photo I think it is, Lucius told me a photographer friend of hers took that when they were messing around in her studio one day. He keeps a copy of it on his desk both at home and in the office. He says it’s how he prefers to remember her since it’s one of the last photos she took before they found out she was sick again. I was…two, I think?” She said wrinkling her nose and turning to her brother.

“About that,” he nodded. “I remember because you started staying at our house more and more for
overnight visits until you basically moved in, then we all started going over to dad’s place right after he took her out of hospice care, mom included. It’s all a little fuzzy though. I remember Peggy and mom taking care of her and Tam kept asking when she was going to get over her cold so they could paint together like they used to.”

“How’d your mom die?” Renee asked her, handing the tablet back to Dick.

“Complications from Leukemia; ALL,” she told her. “She had a badly compromised immune system due to the chemo and caught an infection that killed her.”

J’onn looked at her, his expression thoughtful, “Are you quite sure that’s what she had?”

She turned her attention to him, “That’s what I was told; why?”

“Several extraterrestrial species have visited this world throughout history,” J’onn told her. “While not all aliens are necessarily humanoid, the majority of the ones that visited this planet were. There are a few different species that I know for certain have attempted to colonize Earth in a limited capacity. The White Martians who are a second species from my own planet, the Daxamites which are cousins to the Kryptonians—”


“Yes, at least I believe so,” J’onn told him. “I’ve never met this ‘Superman’ but his abilities and physiology do resemble that of the Kryptonian people.”

“So he really is an alien?” He said in surprise.

“More than likely,” the other man nodded. “The fact that he spoke of Krypton by name is quite telling as that world was destroyed some time ago. It also explains how he came to make his home here as Kryptonians and Daxamites were highly xenophobic and rarely left their colonies. Both species share common ancestry and originated in the Antennae Galaxy; the Kryptonians in Corvus and the Daxamites in Virgo near what your people call Spica. Early Daxamites though were a bit less resistant to travel than Kryptonians, at least they were before the Great Calamity—”

“The what?” Dick asked.

“The Great Calamity,” he repeated. “It’s sometimes known as the Alliance.” At their looks of confusion he explained, “Several thousand years ago a group of aliens known as The Dominators, a highly evolved but aggressive species, waged a Galactic war uniting several powerful races with the intentions of taking control of every known inhabitable planet within what they perceived to be their dominion. When they decided to invade Earth...”

“Aliens invaded Earth thousands of years ago?” Oliver asked skeptically. “Wouldn’t we have heard about that? I mean, wouldn’t it be in the history books or something?”

“Ollie,” Laurel said dryly from beside him before gesturing towards J’onn, “you’re talking to a Martian.”

“There’s a difference between one alien coming to earth and an entire invasion force,” he retorted then frowned as if he couldn’t quite believe that he said that out loud and with a straight face.

“Actually, you have seen evidence of it,” J’onn told him. “This invasion occurred many thousands of years ago but your ancient peoples did make records of it. In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, you have cuneiform tablets and hieroglyphics speaking of the Annunaki—”
“I’ve heard about them!” Luke said excitedly.

“Me, too,” Laurel said, looking at Felicity. “I was telling you about that yesterday when we were looking at that stuff Gypsy mentioned.”

“It’s not surprising that Gypsy and her people would incorporate these stories into their origin mythology; in fact, most Earth religions can be traced back to some historical event which grew in breadth and scope due to primitive humans not being able to comprehend what it was they were seeing,” J’onn told them.

“Are you trying to say that this girl, Gypsy, was right and the Romani really were the descendants of aliens?” Dick said sarcastically, “Because--”

“You know, if you guys would just shut the hell up and let the man speak, he might actually be able to get to that part,” Renee said acerbically.


“Fine,” Dick said disgruntledly.

“That’s quite all right,” the other man said with a hint of amusement. “As I was about to say, the word ‘Annunaki’ is a bastardization of the word ‘Annunake’ which were actually two separate species, one reptilian which were the more dominant species on their homeworld, and their amphibious servant class known as the Hunter/Gatherers. They were sent to Earth as part of the original invasion force along with an entirely aquatic species similar to cephalopods known as the Gil’Dishpan. The Dominators tasked them with securing Earth’s oceans as so much of your world is covered in water while their other allies took care of the rest. It is logical, therefore, that they would have been used as part of an advance team since so much of your world depends on water as both a food source and for travel. I’m not a historian but your legends of sea monsters, mermaids, and dragons likely draw upon your people’s ancestral memories of these particular species. It is for that reason that your ancestors used ‘Annunaki’, which has come to mean, ‘those who from the heavens came to earth’.”

“You said there were others though,” Dick said, obviously getting over being indirectly called an ‘alien’.

“And why invade us to begin with?” Luke added. “If we were so ‘primitive’ then what would be the point?”

“The ‘why’ is rather complicated, the ‘who’ less so,” he told them. “The other species enjoined with the Dominators at that time were the Vimanians, a genetically engineered nomadic race, mostly known for their scientific acumen and ships. It was their ships that most likely inspired the design of many of your ancient temples and pyramids. The Khunds, a warrior race; respected fighters although quite brutish and somewhat unintelligent. The Thanagarians, who were also quite respected for their battle prowess but much more intelligent and excellent strategists. They, along with the Dominators and Vimanians, originated from the Polaris galaxy. The Khunds are fairly human in appearance despite having red skin, but the Thanagarians are a winged people that probably inspired stories of your ‘angels’ as well as the way your Egyptian gods were represented in early hieroglyphics.”


“Angels,” Dick nodded, sipping his own coffee.

“Trippy,” he said wryly.
J’onn shifted in his chair slightly, “Their other allies included the shape-shifting Durlans who are very similar to my own people, along with the Okaarians and the Psions who later evolved to become the Controllers and the Oa.” He turned to Dick, “All three originated in the Vegan system like your Tamaranian friend although the Oa eventually abandoned that system altogether.”

“Originally from the planet Maltus, the race that would become the Guardians or the Oa was one of the first races of intelligent life in the universe. Evolving quickly, they developed a society devoted to knowledge and science, often involving themselves in experiments on other planets which is why the Dominators recruited them for the Alliance. The Psions eventually merged with a symbiotic race native to their homeworld which, along with prompting from some of their philosophical leaders, led them to relocate to Oa in order to repent for their sins by dedicating themselves to destroying evil. They eventually became respected and idolized as peacekeepers and observers but not until many years after the Alliance. Before that, all they were concerned with was the purity of science with no thought as to the devastation left in their wake. Meanwhile the Okaarians, who eventually became known as the Controllers, became best known as slave traders who would ‘improve’ less evolved species genetically in order to create warrior races which could be sold to the highest bidder. After the fall of the Dominators, their race would conquer the Vega system and enslave many of the less aggressive races such as the Tamarans and the Durlans.”

“Along with the others, the Dominators brought with them a clone race known as the Citadelians, biologically based constructs created by the Vimanians who later became known as the Xenobrood. My own people, the Ma’aleca’andrans, refused to take part; but not, I regret to say, out of any sort of sympathy for your people. They stayed out of it because we were mostly concerned with protecting ourselves at the time.”

“Okay, I know we’re not supposed to interrupt but if all these species came here then what happened to them?” Dick asked carefully.

“You did,” he told him. “The human race is what happened. Back then you were quite primitive, a completely different species in fact, and the Vimanians in particular had a fondness for genetic manipulation. They were, after all, engineers and, whether it was building ships or clones, it was what they were bred to do. Not that they had to start from scratch; much of the groundwork had already been laid out for them,” he said, settling back in his chair slightly. “The White Martians had discovered that some of your earliest ancestors, such as Australopithecus afarensis, had a ‘biological variant’, which you now call the meta-gene, that was a potential catalyst for ‘genetic change’ resulting in the potentiality of metahuman abilities. Fearing that your evolution would result in your kind eventually dominating their own, they sought to suppress it. The Dominators, upon hearing about this meta-gene, wished to harness it and breed their own army of metahumans. They instructed the Vimanians to create a hybrid race based on the Citadelians known as the Xenobrood to invade the planet slowly by ‘terraforming’ your DNA. The Xenobrood would interbreed with early humans like Australopithecus afarensis, then Homo erectus, and later Neanderthal to create a new race, Homo sapiens, that would slowly take over the planet in order to become the dominant species.”

“So you’re saying we’re all descended from aliens,” Oliver said dubiously.

J’onn, however, merely nodded, “Your entire species is the result of genetic manipulation. Your earliest ancestor’s DNA went from having 48 chromosomes to 46 due to a deliberate fusion between the second and third chromosomes. This eventually took you from apes to humans.”

“Why would they do that if all they wanted to do was take over?” Laurel asked.

“And, I’m no scientist, but all that took time, like thousands of years,” Renee said in confusion. “We didn’t exactly go from swinging from the trees to building the pyramids overnight.”
"Time was one thing the Dominators had plenty of," J'onn told them. "They would send out deep exploration vessels, 'seed' the planet with these blank constructs, then allow nature to take its course. When they were ready, they'd 'harvest' their crops. As for why they did it, they wanted stronger, healthier slave stock that they could control and breed to produce skilled workers and warriors. Clones like the Xenobrood, while certainly easier and quicker to produce, are limited both in intelligence and life span. They're basically biologically based robots and the Dominators wanted to produce a race on par with the beings such as the Kryptonians but that would be completely under their control. However, as man advanced, so did the world around him. They weren't expecting you to evolve as you did or that the meta-gene would prove to be quite so unstable when combined with the Xenobreed's own genetically manipulated DNA. They also weren't expecting their own invasion forces to turn against them."

"What do you mean?" Felicity asked.

"That's a rather long story in and of itself," he frowned. "I don't know everything but I do know that it began with the Daxamites. They weren't really interested in invading anyone or harvesting slaves. Like early Martians they were purely observers; scientists, who were there to merely document and provide a voice of reason while refusing to take part in any hostilities. While the Dominators and Kryptonians were constantly at war with each other, the Daxamites were never considered to be a threat even though they shared common ancestry. They were completely neutral and were considered to be a rather weak species; mild mannered, highly cerebral, and adverse to all kinds of violence. On Daxam, which was free from most harmful types of virions and bacteria, they were quite long lived but outside of their homeworld, they were highly susceptible to disease which is why not many of them chose to travel. Your ancient legends of men such as Methuselah are most likely based upon one of their descendants."

"Okay, well, between that and the 'angels', there goes twelve years of Catholic school education down the drain," Renee muttered causing both Laurel and Dick to grin at her in sympathy.

"I did not mean to shed doubt on your religious beliefs," J'onn said solemnly.

"It's okay," Renee said waving him off.

"No," he told her. "Despite what I'm telling you now, I still believe there is room for both philosophy and science to exist side by side. My own people had gods of their own in fact. Despite being scientifically inclined, Ma'aleca'andrans were also a deeply spiritual people and the worship of our gods was an integral part of our everyday lives." His face grew solemn as his eyes seemed to dim slightly in pain, "We had several gods but the two most worshipped were H'ronmeer, god of death and darkness, and C'eridyall, goddess of life and light. I was named for her," he told them. "J'onn," again Felicity felt the cool comfort of his name run down her spine along with a sense of peace and serenity. "It means 'light of the light' among my people. Or it did." He seemed to shake his melancholy mood off and smiled at Renee, "Anyway, I am something of a student of your religions as well and have found great comfort in the fact that your philosophies, in their purest form, are not dissimilar to our own. My only regret is that your people rarely live by the principles they claim to love but the fault that lies within those few shouldn't prevent you from finding comfort in the teachings themselves."

"Thanks," she said, her eyes dark and filled with warmth as she appeared to be deeply moved by what he was saying. "It's...been a long time since I..." she swallowed. "Just...thanks." Laurel reached out and squeezed her hand under the table causing the other woman to offer her a grateful smile.

Seeming to understand how uncomfortable Renee was with appearing so emotionally vulnerable at
that moment, J’onn merely inclined his head in acknowledgement before continuing, “As I said before, the Daxamites themselves were genetically engineered from early Kryptonians who decided to wander the universe in exploration. A man named Dax-Am founded the planet which was named after him. The original Kryptonian colonists were able to mate with the natives and so interbred to create a new species, Daxamites.”

“When they came to Earth, they discovered that when exposed to the radiant light of your yellow sun they gained powers and abilities similar to that of the being who now calls himself Superman, including super strength, flight, and near-invulnerability. As the invasion progressed, they hid these new abilities from the others as they quickly realized they were on the wrong side.” He paused for a moment, “As I said, I’m no historian, but legends say that after one of their number uncovered a secret plan to develop then introduce some type of bio-weapon based on the human meta-gene into the Kryptonian populace, he was killed.” He took a moment to look around the table, “Many have speculated that this ‘meta-virus’ was designed to de-evolve the Kryptonians or cause their DNA to become unstable rendering them powerless and resulting in genocide. In any case, this scientist sacrificed his life to radio the Daxamite Starfleet. Within minutes the Daxamite science vessels moved to intercept Dominion warships, which the Dominion found laughable until the crews left the confines of their ships and attacked. Thousands of, well, ‘Super-men’ acting in defense of Earth, turned the tide of the invasion.”

“And then what happened?” Felicity asked, enthralled.

“As time passed, the Daxamites discovered that lead, an element that while common here on Earth is completely nonexistent in Daxam, was highly toxic to them. It forced them to flee back to their homeworld and enact a policy to forever restrict any more travel into this galaxy. Actually, they stopped traveling altogether. All but a handful of the scientists exposed wasted away as they continued to worsen even after being removed from the substance. The death count was… incalculable,” he said solemnly. “That caused some of the Daxam high council to declare the rest of the known universe an infectious biohazard and, eventually, the social unrest stirred by isolationists and explorers exploded in a full-blown civil war. The isolationists won, founding the Cult of Sorrows, and rewriting history to blame all other alien races outside of their own for the ruins of the war and the source of the plague. They also denied any sort of biological ties to either the Kryptonians or humans and enacted a policy where any and all ‘outsiders’ entering Daxam space would be put to death for the public good.”

“A precious few, however, were not susceptible to the lead poisoning after having discovered an anti-serum distilled from gold. They, and some of the other races such as the Xenobrood hybrids, the Thanagarians, and a few others who had taken mates among human kind, chose to remain behind on Earth in order to help rebuild and lead your ancestors into a more advanced society. In time, these scientists and warriors became worshipped as living gods, known as the Annunaki and inspired the basis for many of your world’s religious pantheons.”

“I gotta say, so far this story completely beats out anything the History Channel ever came up with,” Luke said with a grin.

“Glad you liked it; I’m still waiting for him to say, ‘And then they lived happily ever after’,” Dick said causing Laurel and Renee to snicker while Oliver looked as though he agreed with him.

J’onn’s brow ridges drew together slightly, “I wish I could tell you that my ‘story’ had a happy ending, but it does not.” He paused for a moment, “There is an old Earth saying that goes ‘power corrupts but absolute power corrupts absolutely’. As time passed, many of this new ‘pantheon’ decided after several rebellions led by their own descendants, that man was an experiment gone wrong and that the introduction of their ‘superior’ genetics into the human gene pool was a mistake.
They claimed you were too primitive, too violent, and far too resistant to their guidance, so they decided to cut their losses, wipe the slate clean, and rebuild from the ashes.”

“What does that mean?” Oliver asked with a frown.

“I’m sure you’ve all heard stories and myths of the Great Flood or some sort of great Apocalypse; of a war in heaven and fall from grace?” He asked him. “They decided to eliminate mankind, including their own ‘corrupted’ bloodlines, and start from scratch by causing some sort of worldwide devastation which would kill every living thing. Afterwards, when the contagion had been burned away, they would re-seed the world with more superior life forms instead. These ‘gods’ saw you as an infection but a few led by, if the legends are to be believed, four of the beings responsible for the original insurrection, disagreed. These four, supposedly comprised of a Daxamite, a Thanagarian, an Annunake Hunter/Gatherer, and one other, believed to either be one of the original Vimanian Xenobrood hybrids or a Durlan, were greatly loved by mankind and loved them in return. As a result, there was a great battle between the two factions. When the smoke cleared, leaving the majority of their number dead or dying, the surviving Annunaki decided to compromise by abandoning Earth and finding a new world, leaving mankind in peace to evolve as they may.” He took in a deep breath, “However, the Annunaki did leave their descendants behind; men and women your legends refers to as demi-gods or Nephilim who, themselves, were born with abilities similar to modern meta-humans.”

“So wait, if I’m getting this right, and stop me if I am, what you’re trying to say is that you think Felicity is an alien? Like, a real alien and not just like the rest of us ‘hybrids’?” Luke said with a slow spreading grin then snorted, “I hate to break it to you, man, but you are way off. Baby is many things but she’s no Supergirl.”

“Super ‘girl’?” Renee asked him with narrowed eyes.

“Yeah, Supergirl,” he told her. “You know, that dude is a ‘Superman’ so Felicity would be a ‘Supergirl’.”

“Wait one damn minute here,” Laurel scowled, “Why does he get to be ‘Super *man*’ while Felicity gets stuck with being ‘Super *girl*’?”

“Because she has a vagina,” Luke said dumbly. “It’s kind of what makes a girl a girl as opposed to being a guy.”

“I’d really rather you not talk about my vagina with other people, thanks. Or at all for that matter,” Felicity said throwing him a dirty look. “Also, I think what they’re trying to say is that if he gets to be ‘Superman’ and not ‘Superboy’, that I should get to be called ‘Superwoman’ and not ‘Supergirl’.”

“Supergirl sounds better,” he shrugged.

“And why’s that?” Renee shot back.

“Yeah?” Laurel said, joining in.

He blinked, “It’s cuter? I dunno, just does.” He turned to the man sitting beside him, “Doesn’t it?”

“I have had my ass handed to me one too many times this week so I am so not getting in the middle of that,” Dick said ruefully.

Felicity sighed and looked to her two friends who were currently staring daggers at her brother, “In his defense, testicular poisoning combined with living behind a mask has turned him into an idiot.”
“Hey!” He said with a hurt expression.

“Sorry Luke, but you really need to get your head out of your ass soon or one of these ladies is going to test the bounds of good taste and human physiology by attempting to find out if that particular turn of phrase is actually physically possible.”

“I volunteer for inserting head in ass duty,” Renee said raising her hand.

“I’ll help,” Laurel said raising hers as well.

“Regardless of my brother’s poor choice of words,” Felicity said ignoring them, “he’s right. I’m no Super, um, ‘person’.” She smiled, “I’m not super strong, I definitely can’t fly which, since I’m afraid of heights is a good thing, and I know for sure I’m not bulletproof. In fact, I have no abilities whatsoever. My mom wasn’t an alien, she just had a chromosomal disorder and then had the bad luck to develop a disease that killed her; that’s all.”

“What of your father then?” He asked, neither denying nor acknowledging her assertions.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she shrugged. “Frankly, I have no idea who he was.”

“That’s not true,” Oliver said from the other end of the table.

Luke and Dick both looked at him in confusion.

“What is he talking about?” Luke asked turning from Oliver to her.

“Oliver…” She began.

“Slade said your father was Anthony Ivo,” he said, rolling over her protestations.

“He was wrong,” she said, trying very hard not to let her annoyance bleed through and failing miserably. “In any case, now is not the time to bring that up so, please, just drop it.”


“No one,” Felicity said firmly. “He was some mad scientist type Oliver met on Lian Yu.”

“He wasn’t a mad scientist,” Oliver said flatly, “He was a sadistic bastard who murdered and tortured people for kicks and performed the same kinds of ‘medical experiments’ the Nazis performed on the Jews on anyone unlucky enough to be shanghaied by his crew. However, that wasn’t where I was going with that. I know Ivo wasn’t your father because you said your father’s name was Henri Ducard.”

“And I told you to drop it,” she said harshly, her temper beginning to flair.

“What?” Luke said in confusion as he looked between the two of them.

“What?” Dick said as well, only with a chuckle. “Ducard wasn’t Baby’s biological father.”

Something in the way he said that caught her attention, “How do you know?”

“Because I’ve met him for one thing,” he snorted.

“When? How?” she asked, stunned.

“Years ago,” he said off-handedly. “Ducard was the one who trained Bruce back when he was with
Interpol. I met him way back when we were working a case in Paris right before Bruce found out he was working as a freelance assassin on the side.”

“Ducard was an assassin?” She asked faintly.

“Yeah, but he wasn’t your dad,” Dick said confidently. “Unless your mom went to Paris right before you were conceived, it’s impossible. Back then he was still heading an elite taskforce with Interpol tracking militant fundamentalist terrorist groups.”

She looked at him in surprise, “What?”

“Yeah, there’s no possible way he could be your dad,” he told her. “Didn’t Bruce ever tell you about him?”

“No,” she said quietly. “I didn’t…I didn’t actually hear about Ducard from Bruce…”

“The Watchtower files,” he grimaced, running his hand over his hair then sighed. “I’m sorry, Baby; if I had known that’s what you thought, I--”

She shook her head, “What are you talking about?”

“His wife? Felicity Strode?” He offered. “I realize it seems like a bit of a coincidence but, first off, she was killed a good fifteen to twenty years before you were even born so it couldn’t have been Evie living under an alias, plus she was black. Secondly, even if he had gone to Vegas during that time period, which I highly doubt, he wasn’t exactly a ladies man. The guy was an asshole with absolutely no redeeming qualities and he didn’t trust anyone, especially women. He had been burned pretty badly so, after his wife died, the only women he ‘dated’ from then on were hookers. I may never have actually met your mom but, given what I do know about her, I’m fairly confident that she wouldn’t have given him the time of day.”

“Was?” She asked him.

“Last I heard he had stage four pancreatic cancer and that was a couple of years ago,” he said almost indifferently. “He’s probably dead by now.”

“Does Wayne know that?” Oliver asked sharply.

“I don’t know; doubtful,” he shrugged. “Bruce and I haven’t been all that close for the last year or so and that information was dropped in my lap less than a couple of months ago when I was putting out feelers to get the location on someone else. Ducard’s been out of the game for years now anyway so I never even thought to go out of my way to mention it to him.”

“Oh,” Felicity said to herself, a mixture of regret and disappointment washing over her. On one hand, she was glad that her bio-dad wasn’t some dirty cop who murdered people, but on the other hand she…

For years now she had kept the knowledge of her father’s identity close, never intending to seek him out, but happy to know she at least had a name.

Now she didn’t even have that anymore.

“Are you okay?” Laurel asked her looking concerned.

“Yeah, of course. I’m fine,” she said, pretending to shake it off easily.
“Baby, where would you even get the idea this guy was your sperm donor in the first place?” Luke asked, still looking confused.

“Like Dick said, I just…I misread a file; that’s all,” she said smiling tightly. She took a centering breath then directed her gaze towards Dick, “Now, back to what we were talking about; he wasn’t an alien, was he?”

“Nope,” Duck said. “Not an alien, just a hard ass who killed people on the side.”

“And, just in case we’re not done playing ‘Guess Felicity’s Dead Mom’s Babypadly,’ ; Ivo wasn’t an alien either, right?” She asked, turning a less than pleased eye towards Oliver. He merely stared at her, his eyes dark and his back stiff. “Not that I’m trying to suggest that there was any anal probing going on, of course. And not that I’m suggesting aliens actually do probe people, merely that Oliver may or may not have been probed at some point.”

“Were you probed?” Renee asked curiously, her expression one of sympathetic outrage on her behalf.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” Laurel cut in looking equally upset on Felicity’s account. “As long as said probing occurs between two consenting adults.”

“I was never ‘probed’ and Ivo was very human,” Oliver said tersely.

“Good to know,” she told him in as pleasantly a tone as she could muster which wasn’t saying much.

“Why do you humans always assume that aliens have an insatiable need to examine your anus?” J’onn asked with a slight frown as he continued to sip at the coffee he obviously didn’t want, but that Felicity and the rest had decided was probably necessary. “Why would we travel hundreds of light years just to observe the inner workings of your lower digestive tract?”

“You know, I’ve always been kind of curious about that myself,” Luke frowned.

“Can we just stop taking about probing…things?” Dick said uncomfortably.

“Very well,” J’onn agreed before turning his attention back to Felicity, “And you’re quite positive you’re not a meta?”

“Look, I don’t know why or how I could see you, but I don’t have any abilities,” she assured him. “Believe me, there are days when I wish I did, but I don’t.”

J’onn didn’t look convinced however, still he nodded, “There is another reason I told all of you this story. Throughout the ages, your world has been invaded many times.”

“When?” Oliver asked, his expression taking on the same sort of grim stoicism it did whenever he went into hurt animal or Arrow mode, but Felicity really wasn’t in the mood to soothe his wounded soul at that point.

If he had questions about her father he should have had the good grace and courtesy to bring it up privately and not in front of her friends and family. She never brought up the island or his family in front of outsiders, so she wasn’t going to be getting over that one any time soon.

“Not all invasions are violent or obvious,” J’onn told him. “The story I told you is fairly well known, at least among the races who have knowledge of Earth like my own. Many of the more scientifically inclined races, such as the Oa, see your planet and people as something of a curiosity but, for the most part, have chosen to monitor and observe you from a distance.”
“Why?” Dick asked. “I mean, what’s so interesting about us?”

“For one thing human DNA is highly adaptable. Because of the early experiments the Vimanians and White Martians performed on your ancestors, many humanoid species can produce viable offspring with your people. This is a curiosity in and of itself. For another, your people have continued to carry within them the potential of the meta-gene as evidenced by recent events. The meta-gene should have been bred out of you thousands of years ago. The lack of further interference by other alien races should have ensured that, but instead the opposite is true. It is estimated by your own government that 12% of living human organisms carry the gene which means there are roughly 870 million potential metahumans on Earth, 99.9995% of which are completely asymptomatic or so unaffected as to appear completely normal. The other 0.0005%, or roughly 4,350 people with the activated gene, are what you would call full blown metahumans with abilities that range from simple ESP or an increase in intelligence to potentially devastating abilities like those your people have witnessed in the advent of the particle accelerator explosion.” He again looked over them as if to make sure they were paying attention, “This gene along with your highly adaptable DNA makes you a tempting target to other races seeking to build upon what the early Vimanians started.”

“The bee aliens! Hah!” Felicity exclaimed triumphantly causing six pairs of eyes to turn to her in confusion. “The zombie bee aliens,” she prompted, turning to J’onn, “That’s who you’re talking about, right?”

“Zombie bee aliens?” Renee mouthed to Laurel who merely shrugged.

He tilted his head at her, appearing even more confused than he had earlier, “I’m sorry, I’m still not sure…?”

“The zombie bee aliens,” she repeated. “The ones Miranda was talking about. She said that they did something to cause the particle accelerator to explode…?”

“Oh!” He said, understanding suddenly dawning, “Yes and no. Yes, the particle explosion was caused by alien interference, and yes the Korilites, the beings you are apparently referring to as ‘bee aliens’ were part of that, but they weren’t the only ones. There is much more to those events than even I know. That’s what brought me here to you now in fact.”

“Back up,” Dick said, “Who are the…bee alien zombie people again?”

“The Korilites,” J’onn told him. “They’re an insectoid race with a hive mind which is where I assume you got the term ‘bee aliens’ from. They are incredibly short-lived however and constantly looking for ways to increase their life spans. That said, the real power behind the invasion were the Dominators once again. The uprising of groups such as the Oa, greatly diminished their powerbase and rendered them pretty much extinct by forming alliances with the Reach, the Zamarons, my own people, as well as many others to form a United Inter-Planetary police force known as The Green Lantern Corps. The Dominator’s plan was to trigger the dormant meta-gene in your world’s population. Had they succeeded they would have had control of almost 870 million super soldiers.”

“What about everyone else?” Felicity asked while the others absorbed that information in stunned silence.

“The most likely scenario is that it would have killed them almost instantly,” he said solemnly.

“But how did they expect to be able to control that many people?” Oliver asked at last. “If everyone with the meta-gene became some sort of enhanced human, what’s to stop them from fighting back?”

“The Korilites, using Dominator technology, were planning on transferring their consciousness
inside of the bodies of the survivors. The Dominators then planned on using their new army to defeat the Corps so they could take back their former territories and destroy their enemies.”

Silence.

“Seriously?” Oliver said skeptically.

“That’s um, that’s…” Luke stumbled.

“Green what?” Dick scowled.

“I’m thinking of a word and that word is bullshit,” Renee said, crossing her arms over her chest. “Sorry.”

Laurel scratched her head and looked around the table, “I am…so confused right now and I kind of want to hide under my bed until all this goes away.”

“It’s a mindfuck,” Felicity agreed.

“Wait, so are you telling us that you knew about this?” Oliver asked, turning his stern gaze upon her.

“I knew some of it and I only found out what I do know a few hours ago,” she told him.

“So what are we supposed to do about all this?” Laurel asked helplessly. “We can’t fight off an alien invasion. Where would we even start?”

“You don’t have to,” J’onn told her. “There was only one Dominator ship and I, myself, destroyed it almost two years ago. As far as I know, all of the Dominators as well as the Korilites and their queen are dead.”

“So you’re the one responsible for all this mess with the Omega Device and HIVE?” Felicity said in surprise.

J’onn threw her a guilty look as the others turned to her in shock.

“HIVE?” Oliver said darkly.

“The Omega Device?” Dick said in the same tone.


“I have a headache,” Laurel said before turning to Renee, “Do you have a headache?”

“Big time,” she nodded. “Like *huge*.”

Felicity, deciding to give J’onn a well-deserved break, tried to explain, “From what Miranda told me, these bee aliens, the Korilites, have this technology that allows them to control people’s minds. She said it was a kind of pollen.”

“That’s true,” J’onn told her, taking another sip of his now cold coffee with a grimace.

“Zombie…mind control…bee pollen,” Luke muttered then looked under the table.

“What are you doing?” Dick asked him.

“Looking for the listening devices or the camera or something,” he told him.
Felicity nodded, “She also said that they used it to infiltrate the government and to take over the minds of people in positions of power. That means HIVE was actually some kind of alien thing this entire time.”

“Again, true,” J’onn told her. “The invasion force’s numbers were low, as I said, they had only one ship and Korilites are not a particularly hearty race. I don’t know how many there were altogether but I believe there were less than five Dominators and only a few hundred fully mature Korilite drones, the rest to be kept in larva form until after the gene bomb was detonated. While the ‘bee aliens’, as you called them, reproduce quickly, they only live a few weeks at a time and their queen could not sustain their numbers forever. If they tried attacking your people head-on, even with their advanced weaponry, your people would eventually triumph. Also it would attract the attention of the Monitors, the Oa who control the Green Lantern Corps, and they would be forced to flee.”

“Aren’t you a member of this ‘Corps’?” Felicity asked him with a frown. “You said your people were a part of this alliance so why didn’t you just call them and tell them what was happening?”

“My people were but they’re now extinct,” he told her somberly. “I’m the last of my race, the rest of my people were killed off by a plague many years ago. I was, however, a Manhunter, what you would call a police officer, which is how I know of the Corps in the first place. The Manhunters were the precursors of the Corps before a philosophical dispute led them to break ties with the Oa.”

“You’re a cop?” Renee asked in surprise.

“I am,” he told her. “Both as a Manhunter on Ma’aleca’andra and later here on Earth. I took over the identity of a fallen police detective named ‘John Jones’ in the late fifties after Dr. Saul Erdel, the scientist who brought me here, had a heart attack and died suddenly. It was not my intention to do so but the detective caught my eye, not just because his name was so similar to my own, but because I admired him and his skills as a detective greatly. He was a good man, and I shadowed him in order to learn how to function within your society,” he said quietly. “I observed him for almost a year before he was killed by one of his fellow officers. He’d been investigating an organized crime syndicate and had been scheduled to testify against one of its ringleaders. I couldn’t allow the men who killed him to escape justice so, as I already knew all of the facts of the case from my own surveillance, I took the stand in his name and revealed the identity of his killers. After that I decided to retain his identity and did so for many decades, leaving after so many years to establish myself in a new city as my own descendent, either as a police officer or a private detective, so that I could retain the ‘John Jones’ identity.”

“I would change my appearance, my race, but kept the name to honor him.” He shifted slightly in his chair, “Until I was alerted to the existence of HIVE and realized what they were, I lived a human life for the most part. I lived among your people as a human, forming human connections, and adopted this planet as my own. When I came to Earth I had no ship, no technology, nothing. I had no way of contacting anyone as my own people were long since gone. The device Dr. Erdel used to bring me here took me, not only from my home, but from my proper timeline as well. Ma’aleca’andra had been a barren wasteland for centuries. I couldn’t go to the authorities because I had no way of knowing who had been compromised nor could I trust that I would not be captured and treated as a scientific curiosity. I had no choice but to do this on my own.”

All of them looked at him in varying degrees of sympathy as the isolation of the man before them was telegraphed clearly in both his expression and tone. Even the dog began to whimper slightly as he laid his boxy head in the alien’s lap. J’onn stroked his fingers over Ace’s ears before looking at each of them in turn, “I am…deeply regretful for all the damage my actions may have caused you and your people.”
“I didn’t mean to accuse you of anything,” Felicity apologized.


“Perhaps, but mistakes were made,” he said shaking his head. “My mistakes, my arrogance and fear, caused all of this.”

“Caused what? What are you talking about?” Renee asked looking between the two of them in confusion.

“And if HIVE are these aliens and they’re gone, then what the hell is going on?” Oliver asked grimly.

“And what does all this have to do with the Omega Device?” Dick added.

“HIVE used to be the bee aliens, the Korilites or whatever, but not anymore,” Felicity told them. “At least not according to Miranda who may or may not have been telling the truth. According to her, when J’onn sabotaged their ship,” as she said his name he turned to look at her, his expression a cross between curiosity and confusion, “whatever they were doing to the particle accelerator caused everything to go wonky and there was some kind of…temporal disturbance.”

“‘Temporal disturbance’?!” Luke repeated. “As in time travel?”

“Now I’m really calling bullshit,” Dick said flatly. “I’ll take the rest of it with a grain of salt, but…no way.”

“When did this become my life?” Laurel asked, turning to Renee plaintively. “I went to law school. I’m a lawyer. Yeah, I wear leather and beat up bad guys, but they’re human bad guys and they don’t travel through time and space.”

“Yeah, well, I went to cop school and they never covered any of this shit there either,” she responded.

“It’s not as outlandish as it sounds,” J’onn told them. “The Dominators were an incredibly advanced race and learned to harness temporal energy by manufacturing engines that were basically self-contained singularities. This allowed them to travel vast distances very quickly but it was dangerous technology; technology that had been banned for many hundreds of years. I had no idea that was what they were using when I snuck aboard their vessel. I set the charges then left. The only thing that was supposed to be affected was the gene bomb. I wasn’t trying to destroy the ship; I wanted to prevent them from completing their plans. I figured that would be enough to cripple them and that they’d limp away in defeat. However, something else happened, something I don’t understand, and…” he paused, “I’m not a scientist, so I don’t understand all of the mechanics behind it, but instead of the ship directing energy to the particle accelerator then sending the blast outwards, the opposite happened. The particle accelerator overloaded on its own and sent the blast upwards *to* the ship and when my charges went off this caused massive feedback leading to the shockwave that hit the city thereby causing the Dominator’s ship to blow.” He shook his head, “Whatever it was that caused this, whether it was some sort of instability in the engine itself or some miscalculation on my part, when the ship blew apart it caused ripples in time and scattered parts of the temporal engine and remains of the gene bomb throughout time and space.”

Felicity’s eyebrows drew together, “Can I ask you something?” She waited for him to nod, “The Omega Device; can it, I don’t know, freeze time? Temporarily at least?”
“Theoretically, yes,” he told her, “However it would be highly unstable. It was dangerous before it was damaged, afterwards there is no telling what would happen when it was turned on.”

“Could…” her brow furrowed, “Would you, or anyone, be aware of what was happening?”

“What do you mean?” He asked with a frown.

“I mean that if something happened and time, you know, um, froze temporarily would it affect everyone within the blast radius or just some people?”

He seemed to consider that for a moment, “Like I said, it would be highly unstable and unpredictable but I doubt it. It would be only logical to assume that everyone within the radius of such an event would be affected similarly. Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” Felicity told him and ignored Oliver’s pointed look.

“Of course, I could be wrong,” he added. “There may have been fail safes and such to allow for engine leaks or damage. The ship was of ancient Vimanian design so they may have anticipated such a scenario and planned ahead for every possible outcome.” He rubbed his hand over his chin, “The Vimanian’s ship building skills were legendary and everything they did was built to last which is why I did not automatically assume the ship had completely disintegrated in the first place. I’d hoped it had, but it turns out it didn’t. That technology, knowing how potentially dangerous it was, was the first thing I looked for after the explosion but I couldn’t find it anywhere. While tracking HIVE I infiltrated ARGUS--”

“ARGUS?” Oliver broke in, narrowing his eyes.

J’onn nodded, “I needed to know if anything of the wreckage survived and it seemed the most logical place to start since ARGUS would automatically lay claim to any and all alien artifacts. In fact, ARGUS is where I originally established the Alice Liddell identity.”

“Alice Liddell, huh?” Laurel repeated drolly.

“Cute,” Renee grinned.

At the men’s looks of confusion, Felicity explained, “Alice in Wonderland; in other words, J’onn was down the rabbit hole.”

“More like through the looking glass,” Renee snorted.


“Makes two of us,” Dick commiserated.

“Three,” Oliver said dryly.

“The name, as you can see, felt appropriate,” J’onn told them. “I used the identity to get inside of ARGUS so I could see for myself what was going on. I suspected HIVE was much more than a terrorist organization and was soon proved right. After the explosion I found out that Director Waller ignored her orders and secreted the engine your people dubbed ‘The Omega Device’ to a remote military base but only after it had already been stolen. I tipped off Colonel Trevor by leaving a trail of breadcrumbs for his assistant to follow but, before I could retrieve the engine, it was destroyed. Thinking that the problem had resolved itself, I was prepared to go back to my other identity when I was approached by someone with Orbital.”
“I knew they were rivals of ARGUS and that Director Waller was especially contemptuous of their efforts, but wasn’t sure why they wanted me until I went for my ‘interview’. It just so happens that Melvin Atwater, the young man who calls himself ‘Mordred’, had recommended me for the position after he noticed me hacking into Director Waller’s personal files. We worked together at ARGUS and, when he left, he was asked to let them know if there was anyone else at ARGUS who might be open to recruitment. He chose me because we worked well together and also because he knew I was investigating ARGUS and Waller personally.”

“It’s a small world after all,” Felicity said, exhaling slowly.

“Yes, well, curiosity brought me to Orbital’s door but I fully intended to turn them down as my job was done,” he grimaced, “but then I saw the Amazons.”

Luke turned to Dick, “Did he just say Amazons? Like Xena?”

“Don’t—don’t even ask,” the other man said with a pained expression, “Let’s just get through this please while I still have some measure of sanity left. Aliens, okay. Bee zombies? Eh, fine. Time travel; that’s a hard one. Amazons though…” he shook his head, “Yeah, that’s…that’s going to take me a minute.”

“I figured that if anyone here would be into the idea of real life Amazons besides myself, it would be you, Boy Wonder,” Renee drawled. “Provided, of course, they had a couple of redheads in the group.”

“That is so not appropriate right now,” he said flatly.

“But you’re thinking about it, aren’t you?” She smirked.

Luke snorted, “Hell, I know I am. I friggin’ loved that show.”

“Me too,” Renee said with a naughty twinkle in her eye, “Gabrielle was hot but Lucy Lawless? Oh yeah. She sure could wear the shit out of that leather armor.”

Oliver merely shifted in his seat slightly with a furtive look and Felicity, despite being annoyed with him, couldn’t help but smirk at his sudden discomfiture. Dick, on the other hand, looked like he was going to protest before shrugging slightly, his lips turning upwards at the corners ruefully.

“What about the Amazons?” Felicity asked, only she and Laurel actually understanding the reference.

“It was immediately obvious to me that they were under some sort of mind control which meant that something of HIVE had survived,” he told her.

“Okay…” Felicity said furrowing her brow.

“You did, of course, notice that their behavior was off?” J’onn asked her.

“I noticed they were a bit stiff and unfriendly but, then again, they had a bunch of machine guns pointed at me so I wasn’t exactly in the mood to psychoanalyze anyone,” she told him.

“When the hell was this?” Oliver demanded, his posture stiffening once more.

“I was just about to ask the same thing,” Luke said grimly, Dick’s countenance mirroring the other two men’s perfectly.
“The day before yesterday,” she shrugged.

“And you still went back into Orbital afterwards?” Oliver asked angrily.

“Yeah,” she told him.

“Why would you do something like that?” Dick demanded.

“Uh, like you guys stop going out just because someone points a gun at you?” She asked them.

“It’s not the same thing!” Oliver said sharply.

“How so?”

“It just isn’t!”

“I had Laurel and Wildcat there plus a couple of Orbital assets to watch my back,” she said dismissively.

Oliver turned an angry eye towards Laurel, “You knew about that and you didn’t say anything?”

“Did you forget the part where they were pointing the guns at me, too and yet we’re both still okay?” She said slowly. “Besides, Felicity handled it.”

“Felicity handled it?” He bit out. “And how did Felicity ‘handle’ having machine guns pointed at the two of you?”

“Pretty well actually,” she told him, not backing down.

“I told them to drop the guns and they did,” Felicity said sarcastically. “What part of ‘Director Starling’ don’t you understand?”

Oliver pointed at J’onn “He just told us they were under some sort of mind control! What if whoever was controlling them ordered them to shoot you?”

“They were ordered to shoot us but they still dropped their guns when I told them to,” Felicity said easily.

“Which, again, begs the question of how exactly you managed that,” J’onn said eyeing her carefully. “You shouldn’t have been able to break through their mind conditioning so easily.”

“She didn’t do anything to them,” Laurel frowned. “I was right there the entire time. All she did was get really pissed, use her Loud Voice on them, and, next thing you know, they all dropped their weapons and relaxed. She even talked to a few of them and they seemed fine. They answered all of her questions and everything.”

“Fine?” J’onn repeated skeptically.

She looked at him uncertainly, “Well, they were a little stiff, like Felicity said, but considering that English was their second language that’s pretty understandable.”

“Who else did they speak to besides Felicity?” J’onn asked knowingly.

“Um…” Laurel frowned, “I guess nobody now that I think about it.”

“So?” Felicity shrugged.
J’onn looked from one woman to the other, “So did anyone else try to speak to them?”

Felicity and Laurel exchanged looks.

“I don’t…”

“Wildcat tried talking to the one he kept saying was ‘Polly’,” Laurel told her.

“And did she answer him?” J’onn asked.

“No, but that doesn’t mean anything,” Felicity said irritably. “They were under orders not to speak to anyone but the Director, which was me.”

“Hmm,” J’onn hummed and nodded although his expression was still skeptical.

“I’m not an alien, nor am I a meta-human,” she said firmly. “I gave an order and they obeyed; that’s all. Nothing supernatural was going on.”

“Do you remember when I told you earlier that I was telepathic?” J’onn asked her.

“You’re telepathic?” Oliver asked, suddenly eyeing him suspiciously.

J’onn sighed and rested his elbows on the table, his arms folded in front of him, “My people, Martians, had no spoken language. We were an entirely telepathic race. We could speak, but among ourselves we did not. That said, because we were a telepathic race, we had laws governing the sanctity of the mind as well as free will. To invade the mind of another without permission is tantamount to rape. It carried an even harsher sentence than murder,” he told them. “Yes, I am a telepath as well as an empath. I have several abilities, in fact; abilities that your government would find dangerous if they knew of my existence, but I would never use them to cause harm. All I have left of my home, my people, my wife and child, is that sacred trust. I would not ever violate it except under the most dire of circumstances,” he assured him.

He waited until Oliver gave him a reluctant nod of acceptance before continuing. He turned to Felicity, his eyes softening with something akin to regret, “That said, I owe you an apology.”

“For what?” She asked warily.

“Last night, during the mission, I…felt your mind,” he told her. “More than once, actually. I did not read your mind nor did I invade your thoughts; I did, however, attempt to make contact.” He shifted in his chair slightly, “I haven’t…I haven’t felt the pull of another mind like my own in many decades. My people were highly social and I…I missed that feeling,” he said quietly. “Gypsy has a similar presence, although not the same as yours. I felt your…mind, and I attempted to communicate. It was purely instinctual, I wasn’t thinking clearly, but before I could stop myself you…” He paused.

She frowned, “I what?”

“You pushed me forcefully from your mind,” he told her. “It was actually quite painful in fact, and nothing like anything I had ever encountered before except among my own kind.”

“I didn’t do anything,” she insisted.

“Felicity’s not a meta,” Oliver said firmly.

J’onn took a moment, his gaze holding hers, before he reluctantly nodded, “Very well then.”

“So you think Miranda is dirty?” Laurel asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.
“I think there is more to her organization than meets the eye,” he told her.

“You think she’s got some of the tech you were talking about and is using it to control the Amazons?” Felicity asked him, brushing off her own discomfort.

He nodded, “But to what end, I do not know.”

“She said that Waller and Lex Luthor are teaming up to try to find the rest of the debris you were talking about, especially the pollen stuff,” she said, straightening in her chair slightly. “She said that Luthor was trying to replicate it because all he had was a small sample and that Waller and he were in cahoots.”

“Cahoots?” Dick said, arching a sardonic eyebrow.

“Cahoots,” Felicity repeated. “As in they’re working together on the sly; what other word should I have used?”

“I don’t know, it’s just…” he shrugged half-heartedly, “Cahoots’ kind of sounds like you’re about to hunt down some cattle rustlers before riding off into the sunset or something.”

“I say ‘cahoots’ sometimes; what’s wrong with that?” Renee challenged.

“Nothing, I just—” he began with a smirk.

“I also like to watch the occasional Western,” she said, cutting him off. “Rio Bravo was the shit; Dean Martin, John Wayne. I liked them in The Sons of Katie Elder, too; you got a problem with that?”

“No,” Dick said carefully.

“And cattle rustling was serious business back in the day,” she told him. “Still is, in fact. Did you know that cattle rustling is up by more than 40% in this country? You get caught stealing a cow and it comes with a ten year prison sentence in most places; that’s per cow, by the way.”

“Um…” he began.

“And back in the Old West, a family’s entire livelihood could rest on just one cow. They used to hang people for stealing cattle because even one cow could be the difference between life and death,” she told him.

“I’m sorry?” Dick said wide-eyed.

“Sorry for what?” Renee asked him in the same no-nonsense tone.

“Sorry for…um, making a disparaging remark about the term ‘cahoots’?” He offered tentatively.

“And?” She prompted.

“And…cattle rustling?”

“And?” She asked again.

“Uh, sorry for…” he looked to Luke for some kind of clue but the other man stared resolutely at the table and refused to meet his eyes. “Um, unintentionally making fun of cowboy movies and I think ‘cahoots’ is a fine word that I intend to use whenever possible from here on out?”
“Damn straight,” Renee told him, straightening in her chair, “You don’t fuck with the Duke, or with Dino for that matter. Not around me, you don’t.” Laurel looked at her with an odd expression on her face. “What?” She frowned.

“You know how I told you I was straight?” She asked her.

“Yeah?” Renee said carefully.

“I’m still straight but, I have to admit, watching you spank Dick’s hiney just now kind of turned me on a little bit,” she confessed.

Oliver and Luke both looked on in surprise while Dick scowled, his cheeks reddening slightly.

“She didn’t--!” He began only to stop suddenly as Luke elbowed him sharply in the ribs.

“Shut up, dude; I wanna see where this is gonna go,” he told him quietly.

“Really?” Renee said brightly.

“Little bit, yeah,” she admitted.

“That’s good to know,” Renee said with an almost shy grin, “Of course, being your sponsor, we couldn’t…”

“Yeah, I know,” Laurel said with a hint of naughtiness twinkling in her eyes, “Plus, I’m straight. The whole exclusively liking guys thing could be somewhat of an obstacle there.”

“There is that,” she nodded. “Except for that time in college you mentioned.”

“True,” she agreed, “but everyone’s bi in college at some point.”

“Wait; what happened in college?” Oliver asked with a frown.

“Can we get back to the subject at hand?” Felicity asked them, “You know, the whole massive conspiracy thing between Waller and Lex Luthor involving alien tech and mind control because we’re sort of supposed to be heroes here?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Luke said waving her off, “but first Laurel was going to talk about something that happened to her in college…?”

“Who are you supposed to be; Tim?” Felicity said sarcastically before turning to a bemused looking J’onn, “Okay, where were we?”

“What I think is that Miranda is compelling the Amazons in some way and that she could very well have a sample of the pollen. Or not,” he said with a frown. “I haven’t broken into her mind, tempting though it may be, nor will I. From what I’ve seen however, I think she does have this tech but, if she does, she’s not using it for the same purpose that Amanda Waller or Lex Luthor would and that is what’s most confusing to me.”

“What do you mean?” Oliver asked him.

“She’s not using it for financial gain or power,” he answered, “two things people like Amanda Waller and Lex Luthor would use it for; two things most people would use it for. Instead she is genuinely using the Amazons as weapons against this League. She’s also doing good work, stopping people from getting killed, dismantling League strongholds, freeing innocent metahumans being illegally detained in ARGUS’s underground facilities, and funding vigilante missions all over the
globe. Also, from what I’ve been able to see, she seems to highly regard the Amazons as a force to be reckoned with and has used their society as a model for all that Orbital stands for. Because of that I can’t really be sure of anything. I don’t know the Amazons, I’m unfamiliar with their race, and their minds are…” He shook his head, “I don’t know if the denseness within their consciousness is due to mind control or whether they, too, are of extraterrestrial origin. They greatly resemble the Zamarons who, like the Oa, have natural defenses against telepathy, even passive telepathy like the kind I attempted to use. They may very well be, as you said, merely a very stiff and stoic people. I very much doubt it, but that is a possibility.”

Felicity looked at him, “But you said so yourself; if there’s even a small chance she’s taking away people’s free will then she needs to be stopped.”

“I agree,” he told her. “The question is how? *If* she has the mind control pollen then she’s acting as the hive mind’s queen. That means that until she is cut off from it, her soldiers will remain in her thrall. In order to sever her link to the Amazons, if such a link truly does exist, we need to find out where she’s keeping the tech.”

“And then?” Felicity asked him.

“We destroy it,” he said simply. “We have to destroy it anyway; it’s far too dangerous. The problem is that if we sever the link by merely destroying the hive tech, it could kill everyone who is linked to that signal instantly.”

“But if it’s just some kind of pollen…?” Renee began.

“The ‘pollen’ is merely a drug used to initially control the subjects minds,” he told her. “The effects are temporary. However, if my theory is correct, she has these Amazons linked together as one; one mind all under her control which means she’s using a central processor to route the signal. If you sever that connection it will send the Amazon’s minds into shock and could kill them. They could stroke out or their hearts could stop.”

“Like the ischemic attack Lois had during the Miller hearing,” Felicity interjected.

He nodded.

“So how do we stop her?” Dick asked.

“We need to find it and shut it off correctly then destroy it,” J’onn told him.

“What if we can’t find it though?” Luke asked with a frown.

“There is…one other solution. Actually two,” he said quietly.

“What?” Oliver asked.

“Her death would disrupt the signal initiating a fail safe,” he told him. “Although queens are longer lived than the drones, they do die eventually. The artificial hub linking all of them together was designed to shut down until the new queen reactivates it.”

“What’s the other solution?” Felicity asked.

“I go into Miranda’s mind and force her to reveal the location of the device and then have her release all of the drones.”

“So just do that then,” Laurel told him.
“He can’t,” Felicity said before J’onn could answer.

“Why not?” She frowned.

“He told you why not,” she said easily. “It would be like us ordering him to violate her intimately and I for one don’t want to put anyone in that position, do you?”

Laurel looked at her uncertainly for a moment before sighing, “No,” she said at last. “No, of course not, but what other option do we have?”

Felicity caught Oliver’s eyes.

There was only one other option if they couldn’t locate the device. The first option.

“I’m not going to ask J’onn to act against his beliefs,” Felicity said firmly, pushing the darkness from her mind before it took hold, “Not if…not as long as there are other options we have yet to explore and not until we’re absolutely sure that is what we’re actually dealing with.”

“Like what other options? We kill her; is that it?” Dick said as though reading their minds.

Felicity leveled her gaze at him, feeling the ice that had never existed there before six months ago begin to build. Without answering him directly, she said, “J’onn repeatedly admitted he isn’t even sure she’s using this device,” Dick looked as if he were going to object so she held up a hand to forestall him. “I’m not going in guns blazing and I’m not going to ask someone to commit an act his people viewed as akin to rape unless I have all the facts first. Even after that, it’s J’onn’s decision, not ours. If that’s all it would take I’m sure he never would have bothered outing himself to us. He would have just done it and disappeared, correct?”

“Correct,” J’onn admitted gravely. “If I thought that violating Miranda’s mind would save lives then, yes, I would do what needed to be done. However, the sense I get is that there is another agenda at play here. While I believe she was telling the truth about most of what she told you, and as much of my own investigation supports that, there is something else, something more, and I fear if we act rashly we may cause more harm than good.”

“And what if we do what it is I think you’re suggesting which is sit on our hands and wait, and she winds up using whatever this crap is to send these Amazons of hers out into the streets?” Renee asked.

“Either way it’s a risk,” Felicity answered for him, “but, so far, Miranda and Orbital have been working for the public good; at least from what we’ve seen so far. According to her, she’s planning on using the Amazons to take down Ra’s al Ghul and the League—”

“She told you that?” Oliver asked stone-faced.

She nodded, “I agree with J’onn that there’s more to Miranda than what she’s letting on but I also think the smart play is to wait it out a little longer and not rush in. Moving too quickly on this is just as big a risk as waiting it out so we might as well opt for the more conservative option.”

“So your definition of conservative is to let her maintain control of her own Amazon army?” Dick asked wryly.

“Yes,” she said simply.

“Fine,” he said with a slight nod, “I’m all for using the cautious approach, but you and I both know that when Bruce hears about this it won’t matter what we decide here and now, he’ll run with his
own plan which will, most likely, involve hitting up Orbital and taking this Miranda down hard.”

“No, he won’t,” she said confidently.

“How do you figure?” He asked her.

“Because Miranda is already long gone,” she said easily. “According to what I’ve heard, she never
stays still for long and she’s already left the Orbital facility which is currently empty. No one is there,
she shut it down for the rest of the week until Monday. Therefore, while storming the gates sounds
like a cool and nifty option, it’s also stupid and a waste of everyone’s time, plus it will just tip her off
to the fact that we know something’s up. She’ll either go underground or it’ll ramp up her timeline
and then we really will be screwed.”

“I agree but do you really think Bruce will go for it?” He asked her with a knowing look. “He’s still
going to want inside of that facility.”

“I do, too,” Oliver told her, his eyes glittering dangerously.

“If Bruce or you,” she looked at Oliver pointedly, “wants in, I can just escort you in through the front
door and give you both the nickel tour personally,” she told him. “In any case, it doesn’t matter what
Bruce or any of you decide; this is an Orbital matter and we’ll handle it.”

All of them, including Renee and Laurel, looked at her in surprise.

“I’m sorry, I must not have heard you correctly,” Oliver said coldly, “Did you just imply that you
were cutting us out of this op?”

“I didn’t imply anything,” she said calmly, “I merely stated a fact. While the Birds and I would
appreciate the assist, this is ultimately our mission, not Team Arrow’s and not the Bat’s.”


“The Birds,” Laurel agreed then flashed Felicity a grin, “Our team; the Birds of Prey.”

“You call your ‘team’ the Birds of Prey?” Oliver said scathingly. “And how many people are on this
‘team’ of yours? Just you and Laurel?”

Laurel shot him a dirty look while Felicity merely smiled, “Yup,” she told him, “plus Sara, Lyla,
Gypsy, Helena—”

“Helena is on your team?” He sneered. “I don’t think so.”


“That’s right,” she nodded, “Plus J’onn.” She looked at the man in question, “She may have been a
disguise, but Alice was a member of Orbital and an ally; that makes him a Bird if he wants it.”

“Absolutely,” Laurel agreed.

He looked at her in surprise before nodding, “I would be honored to be considered part of your team
and I’m sure Mordred would also be willing to support our cause. He has proved to be a worthy and
reliable ally both to myself and to Gypsy.”

“That makes twelve,” Felicity told him with a hard look, “Twelve Birds of Prey compared to five
members of Team Arrow—”
“Wait, are you including my dad in that count because I guarantee that once he hears about this he’s jumping ship and teaming up with the Birds,” Laurel cut in. “Thea, too, for that matter.”

“Well, I didn’t want to be greedy but you might have a point,” Felicity admitted pursing her lips in thought.

“Call yourselves whatever you want,” Dick said darkly, “When Bruce gets here he’ll pull the plug; you know it and I know it. He’s a control freak and Gotham belongs to the Bat.”

“Gotham might belong to the Bat but, as Miranda herself pointed out to me just last night, Orbital lays claim to everything else, including our facility and assets,” she told him. “And I have twelve—”

“Don’t forget Tam as lucky thirteen,” Laurel broke in.

“Add one more to that,” Renee told her.

“Really?” Laurel asked her.

“Hell yeah,” Renee said confidently. “A bunch of girl masks kicking ass and taking names? Consider me in.”

“Fourteen members of the Birds to,” she paused, looking around the table, “six Bats, including Alfred and Barbara and assuming Tim makes it here in time to take part in whatever op Bruce manages to cook up. Even if your two teams clan up to try and muscle your way in so you can push us out, we still have you outnumbered and outgunned with two meta-humans, three trained assassins, a former ARGUS agent, five highly experienced fighters and martial artists, one of whom is immortal and who trained Bruce, an alien, at least one other elite hacker and mission tech besides myself, and oh, by the way, me; the one person who knows both yours and Bruce’s teams inside out and who will be leading the charge,” she reminded him calmly.

“Wha-pow!” Laurel said, making a whipping sound as she arched her eyebrow at a now visibly frustrated Oliver.

“Hot damn,” Renee said, leaning back in her chair with a grin and doing a slow clap.

“I…kind of want to be a Bird now,” Luke admitted reluctantly.

“Yeah, me too…” Dick said slowly.

Felicity shot an amused look towards her brother and Dick before turning back to Oliver, “I’m going to tell you the same thing I plan on telling Bruce when he comes home,” at her reference to the penthouse being her and Bruce’s shared ‘home’, his face darkened, “You can stop treating both myself and Laurel like we’re amateurs playing at being masks and get with the program once and for all, or you can find yourself on the sidelines while we do what needs to be done. And, should you choose option two, I highly suggest you keep out of our way because, as much as I’d hate to have to do it, I will not hesitate to shut both you and Bruce down if it means protecting my people.”

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?” He asked her.

“It means I’ll cripple you,” she said simply. “I’ll have Mordred hack your coms and shut you down then have my people secure and confine you for your own safety so you and Bruce can know what it feels like to be sidelined for a change. Then, after the smoke clears, we’ll let you out so you can limp home with your tail tucked between your legs. Or, you and Bruce can stop this macho posturing bullshit and all three teams can agree to work together as equals. Your choice.”
He studied her in silence for a moment before speaking, “Do you honestly think you could do something like that?”

“Work together?” She asked. “Why not?”

His eyes narrowed slightly as he stared her down, “Shut us down and sideline us.”

“I know I can,” she said easily. “I built both LAIR and Watchtower and I know every move and every strategy you and Bruce have ever employed plus I have better numbers on my side. That said, I don’t want this to be an us versus them thing; the Birds are made up of both Arrows and Bats along with a dash of Orbital so it only makes sense for us to act as a cohesive unit. After all, we all want the same thing here. If you and Bruce can’t see that, or refuse to cooperate out of wounded pride or some need to prove you’re in control, then all you’ll be doing is cutting off your nose to spite your face. Frankly, I have enough on my plate with alien invasions and mind control conspiracies without having to deal with soothing your and Bruce’s bruised egos as well.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that if you do force my hand on this, I will cut you loose, make no mistake.”

“Damn, that was harsh,” Luke hissed under his breath while Dick rubbed his hand over his forehead and winced.

Oliver held her gaze for a few moments before reluctantly relenting, “Fine,” he agreed at last. “You get Wayne to throw in and we’ll follow your lead, but only if you agree not to take any unnecessary risks and not go off half-cocked.”

“I’ll work with you and Bruce but if I need to go in, I will,” she said instead. “Also, the Birds are my team, not yours and not his; they follow my orders in the field.”

He glared at her, “That’s not--!”

“That’s the deal, Oliver; take it or leave it,” she said firmly.

“Deal,” he said reluctantly.

Felicity glanced at the clock on the wall and stretched her tense muscles then looked around the table, “Okay, well, Bruce is coming home soon and I wanted to take a bath and catch some shut eye. Also, I know you guys need to finish patrolling before sun up and Renee and Laurel wanted to catch an early meeting so I say we break up this party for tonight.” She looked at J’onn, “Do you have a place or did you want to use one of the guest rooms?”

J’onn looked at her in surprise, “I appreciate your hospitality but I have a small apartment here in the city, thank you.”

“Okay, but given your reaction earlier I don’t want you driving or whatever.” She looked to Renee and Laurel who nodded as they all got up from the table.

“We’ll drive you home in Felicity’s van,” Renee told him.

J’onn nodded, his face breaking out in a wide grin, “Thank you. It feels…very good to be part of a team again.”

“Birds of Prey forever,” Laurel said smiling as she threw Felicity a wink.
“I kind of like that,” Renee smiled as well. “‘Birds of Prey forever’. We should get matching tats and have some t-shirts made.”

“Hey, you guys should start your own softball team,” Luke snickered.

“You joke but I kicked ass at softball back in high school,” Laurel told him.

“Oh my God,” Renee said, looking at her in amazement, “How are you not a lesbian?”

“Just a reminder,” Felicity called out before they all headed for the door. “Tonight is the first annual Birds of Prey Friendsgiving and you’re all invited. I figure we’ll have dinner around seven or so if that’s okay with everyone.”

“Friendsgiving?” Oliver frowned.

“We didn’t have Thanksgiving last year so Felicity and I wanted to do something tonight when Sara and the others get back from Siberia,” Laurel told him. “I bought a thirty pound turducken and Wildcat is probably going to grill steaks.”

“We’ll also have plenty of veggies and meat-free side dishes for you as well,” Felicity told J’onn at his curious look.

“I would be honored to join you for your celebration of friendship,” J’onn said as he placed his hand over his heart then bowed in what appeared to be some sort of formal gesture.

“I could go for a steak,” Dick said easily.

“Plus poker and maybe some pool if Zander drops off that billiards table he was talking about yesterday,” Renee told him.


“Make sure to let Alfred know about it as well,” Felicity told him. “What about you?” She asked turning to her brother.

Luke snorted, “Are you kidding; you guys had me at ‘food’.”

“Oliver?” She asked, keeping her expression neutral.

“I never say no to turducken,” he said lightly but his expression was still shuttered. “Mind if I talk to you in private before we head out?”

They all said their goodbyes, Laurel giving her a meaningful look before heading off with Renee and J’onn, before she turned to Oliver.

He stood in front of the chair where he’d been sitting, his fingers curled around the seat back silently as he seemed to be waiting for something. Felicity merely cleared the cups and dishes from the table and moved them over to the dishwasher.

He tracked her with his eyes and waited until she turned on the dishwasher before speaking, “I’m sorry for bringing up Ivo.”

“No, you’re not,” she said glancing up at him as she rinsed off her hands and reached for a dishcloth to dry them.

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you,” he told her.
“Why bring it up at all?” She asked him.

“Wayne…” he sighed and shifted his weight slightly. “We were talking about the Mirakuru and the Lazarus Pits, and I mentioned that Slade said Ivo was your father but that you said Henri Ducard was his name instead.”

“And what did Bruce say?” She asked, busying herself by wiping down the counter to avoid looking in his eyes.

“Same thing Grayson did.”

A spike of pain lanced through her but she shrugged it off, “Okay.”

“Felicity…” he began.

“Why were you talking about the Mirakuru?” She asked, feigning interest.

“Uh, Wayne thinks that the herbs from Lian Yu and the Pits might be connected,” he said with an uncomfortable expression. “He thinks that’s why Ra’s has an interest in Starling; something about me and Wayne being part of some kind of prophesy he believes in.”

“Makes sense,” she told him. “Not about the prophesy but about the herbs and the Mirakuru. What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” he said with a half-hearted shrug. “Maybe. Doesn’t matter, it’s gone and so is Slade. As for the prophesy, I doubt I’m Nyssa’s type so that’s kind of a moot point as well.”

“True,” she told him.

He approached her carefully, “I know I might act like an ass sometimes…”

“Sometimes?” She muttered with a snort.

“…but I do respect you and your skills,” he continued. “I just…the idea of you leading a team worries me.”

“Why?” She challenged, meeting his eyes at last.

His face softened, “When you lead a team everything that happens is ultimately on you.”

“I realize that.”

He shook his head, “Leading a team means people are going to eventually die under your watch. It means sending them out knowing you’re sending them out to die and…I’m worried that…”

“You’re worried that what?”

He met her gaze steadily, “When you lead a team, all that matters is the team, the mission. I always wanted more than that for you.”

“Really?” She said coolly.

“Yes, really,” he said with a hint of anger.

“Like what?” She asked him.
His eyes flashed, “Marriage, children, a family, a life; everything I ever wanted for you! Everything I ever wanted…” He looked away from her onto the counter, “Everything I ever wanted *with* you but couldn’t have because of the mission.”

“You made that choice, Oliver,” she reminded him. “You made the decision not to have any of those things. That was your choice and now this one is mine.”

He didn’t say anything, merely inclined his head slightly and headed to the door. He paused, his hand gripping the handle, but he didn’t turn. He merely said, “Sometimes we don’t get to choose, Felicity. Some choices are made for us.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Do you?” He asked, turning towards her slightly.

She chuckled humorlessly, “It seems all anyone ever does these days is try to make choices for me, so yeah; I get it. That doesn’t mean I’m willing to roll over and just accept it or believe that I can’t have both happiness and a mission without at least trying first. If you think that you can’t have it all, if you’re not even willing to try to be happy or make a life for yourself, then that’s your decision, Oliver. That’s not anyone *taking* anything from you; that’s you giving up without a fight and running scared. That’s *you*! You’re the one spending all his time dying instead of doing something about it! That’s you…” She took a calming breath, “You keep telling me not to be with Bruce—”

“Yes, I do!” He said rounding on her. “Because he isn’t going to give you what you think he will!”

“At least he’s trying,” she said in frustration. “He’s trying, Oliver! He saying, ‘It might not work but let’s make the attempt! Let’s at least do *something*, make *something*!‘” She rubbed her eyes wearily, “I can’t…You can lead a horse to water but you can’t force it down his throat! I can’t force you to see what’s right in front of your eyes, I can’t spend the rest of my life in this limbo you’re putting us in—”

“Limbo?” He snorted derisively.

“Yes, Limbo!” She pointed at the kitchen table, “Were you paying any attention to anything in there tonight? We spoke to an alien, Oliver! An *alien*!”

“I don’t—?” He shook his head in confusion.

“The world, the universe, it’s so much bigger and smaller than we ever thought!” She told him. “There’s more to life than sitting in a basement and waiting for the right bullet or the right bad guy to end it! I don’t want to spend the rest of my life choking on ice and waking up disappointed because I’m not dead yet! There’s so much more to do, so much more to see, so much left to experience!” She said pleadingly. “And it’s not just about aliens or meta-humans, it’s about us! It’s about creating a life; not just children, but a greater life than this. I want to live and I want to see all of those things. I want to…I want a partner, Oliver. I want someone beside me, not someone dragging me along or pulling me back! I want someone there beside me willing to take it one step at a time, someone willing to move forward and leave the past behind where it belongs!”

“I did that!” He said angrily. “I was your partner!”

“Not all the way,” she told him. “I love you but you were always trapping yourself in the past; from day one your entire life has been about keeping yourself a prisoner.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” He snapped.
“You’ve never left the island, not once,” she told him. “You’re still on Lian Yu; even now, you’re still trapped in hell because you refuse to live. The sad part is that it’s all there, all of it, right at your fingertips, but you’re so utterly convinced that you can’t have it, that you won’t make even the small amount of effort it would take to try.”

“I can’t be Oliver Queen and the Arrow,” he said in a low growl. “I can’t! I have tried; over and over, I’ve tried, and every time I’ve made the attempt it’s come at a price! My dad, Tommy, my mom, Connor! All of them died or had their lives ruined because of me!”

She shook her head, “They made their choice, they chose their path. Your parents *chose* to get involved with the Undertaking, Tommy *chose* to go to CNRI that night, and Connor—you didn’t ruin his life! You may have complicated it, yes, but that was on Malcolm, not on you! You have a son, Oliver; a *son*! Your child is out there waiting for you to find him and yet you won’t even make the attempt to be his father. Instead you spend your days lamenting the fact that you can’t, but you’re the one making all of your own choices.” She took another centering breath, “This one? This choice? *My* choice? My decision to create a home and a family while doing what I’m good at and that means something? This is mine,” she told him. “I’m *choosing* to live. I’m tired of…” she sighed, “I can’t spend my life denying myself happiness because you decided people like us don’t deserve it.”

“I never said you didn’t deserve it, Felicity; just me,” he told her.

“Again, that’s your choice,” she told him. “Just like I’m going to choose to prove you wrong by finally moving forward with the rest of my life and stop living for maybes.”

He opened his mouth as if to argue with her but, instead, he merely nodded and left.

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When Bruce entered the penthouse everything was dark and still, the sun not due to rise for another hour or so. He carried his suitcase and the large bags from Killinger’s in himself having refused assistance from security, and headed directly for the bedroom. He heard the click-click of the dog’s toenails against the floor as he nosed open the swinging door to the kitchen and approached him with a happy lolling grin.

He stopped long enough to put down the bags and give him a fond pat on his flank as he sidled up to him, “Hey Ace,” he said quietly. The dog whuffed at him quietly and waited for him to pick up his bags then led him to Felicity’s bedroom door.

The large Dane tried nosing in ahead of him when he reached for the knob but Bruce pushed him away gently. “No,” he said in a quiet but firm voice and pointed back towards the kitchen. “Go. Out.”

The dog whimpered softly, casting his soft brown eyes towards the bedroom longingly, before reluctantly obeying. He couldn’t blame him really, all he’d been able to think about since he left was crawling back into her bed so he could just hold her in his arms and breathe her in. It felt as though he hadn’t seen Felicity in months even though it had only been a few days.

It was hard to believe how much she’d changed him in such a relatively short amount of time. Not too long ago, the only thing he cared about was the mission, being the Bat. Nothing else mattered after the night he lost his world and nothing else ever would. He didn’t care if he lived or died as long as no one else ever had to feel that pain. He needed to punish people like the man in the alley, take his own justice no matter the personal cost. He’d loved women before and either walked away or he pushed them away, every single one, because all they were, were a distraction to his mission; to
what was really important.

Until her.

He tried to push her away, time and time again, but she never left him. Even when she wasn’t there, it was always about her. She became his symbol, his light in the darkness, and now he had her in his life and in his bed and he wasn’t giving that up without a fight. If there was one thing this trip had taught him, it was that his time as being just the Bat was over. He had a new mission now; Felicity. She was it. Keeping her safe, giving her the life she deserved, was it. Did it scare the hell out of him? Yes, but then again fear was something he’d learned to get past a long time ago. He had a plan and he intended to execute it. He intended to be with her, create a life with her and, no matter what it cost him, no matter how far he had to go or what he had to do, even if it cost him the unthinkable, he was going to keep her and the family they’d create together safe.

He opened the door quietly and headed inside. It was dark but Felicity had left the curtains open slightly allowing the ambient lights of the cityscape to cut through the darkness just enough to allow him to see where he was going. Not that he needed it, he lived in the dark.

At least he did until she came back into his life.

Felicity lay on her side facing him, her dark eyelashes a stark contrast to the almost unearthly glow of her pale cheeks, her bright curls spilling over the pillow as she slept. He put the bags from Killinger’s on the floor by the bed, then set his suitcase and garment bag near the dresser, before stripping off his coat and jacket and tossing them in the chair.

He watched her as he silently undressed, his resolve to talk to her about all the events he’d missed since being gone fading with every passing second. He didn’t want to talk, and for once he didn’t want to think about the damn mission; he just wanted her.

He stripped down to his underwear and walked into the bathroom to relieve himself then tossed his clothes into the hamper. As he completed his ablutions he looked around and marveled at how she’d managed to change his entire world with her presence. Her toothbrush was in the cup were only his once stood, her makeup case sat beside the sink spilling its contents messily over the counter, her clothes in the hamper were now entangled in his own, and her soap and shampoo sat on the shelf next to his. The minute he entered the apartment he could smell her perfume, the same scent his mother wore that reminded him of better days, but it was stronger here and in the bedroom. As soon as he caught her scent, the ever present knot in his chest loosened, and he began to finally relax.

He’d never considered the penthouse his home; still didn’t really. It was a crash pad at best, but she made it feel like a home, and soon she’d be with him in the manor where she belonged. Her presence there would chase away all the ghosts and shadows, would warm all the cold corners and bring laughter into silent halls. In just a few short days she’d turned a status symbol into an oasis, and soon she’d turn the ghosts of his past into hope for the future; a future filled with the laughter of children and days spent curled up together in front of the fire. From here on out there would be no more missed or forgotten holidays, laughter and conversation around the dinner table, stolen moments of peace and lazy mornings in bed, and her; his Felicity.

His wife.

This. This, he decided, this was his life. This was it.

Just her.

He approached the bed, his bare feet making no noise as he reached out with one finger to trace the
line of her cheekbone then tuck an errant curl behind her ear. He missed her old color, the pale stark
glow of moonlight in her hair, but the gold was beautiful as well. It was warm and bright, and it
suited her because she always seemed to carry some inscrutable light around her, like a living ray of
sunshine.

She nuzzled her cheek into his hand unconsciously and he smiled.

“Hi Baby,” he whispered as he knelt beside the bed.

Her eyelids slowly fluttered open and her cupid’s bow lips curled into a sleepy smile, “Bruce…
you’re finally home,” she said happily.

“I’m home,” he smiled then kissed her softly. It was a teasing kiss, just a light brush of his mouth on
hers. He closed his eyes and breathed her in then traced her lips with his own, back and forth, teasing
and worshipping at the same time.

God, he missed this. How had he even survived being away from her for a day much less two?

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you, too,” she said, lifting up from the bed just enough to prop herself up against the pillows
and bring her fingers to his face so she could trace lightly over the faint stubble on his cheeks. “I
missed you.

“I missed you more,” he told her, kissing her again before reluctantly pulling back.

“You did?” She asked happily.

“Yup,” he told her, the unfamiliar tug of a smile pulling at his cheeks. “I even got you a present.”

“Really?” She asked running her eyes teasingly over the naked expanse of his chest then further
down. “So I see,” she said arching an eyebrow at the evidence of his stirring interest.

“That’s not the present I was referring to but it works for me,” he said rising to his feet and getting in
the bed.

“I’m sure it does,” she said huskily, offering him another teasing kiss. “It looks like it’s in fine
working order anyway; care to give it a test drive just to be sure?”

“Minx,” he chuckled as he lifted the duvet and crawled inside, his mouth capturing hers as he rolled
her onto her back and settled between her thighs. He made a small growl of pleasure as her hands
cupped his face, her fingers sinking in his hair and scratching at his sideburns. “I missed you so damn
much,” he said a little breathlessly as their kisses grew more passionate. He traced the outline of her
lips with his tongue then pushed open her mouth so he could show her with his kiss what it was he
intended to do with his body.

She whimpered slightly as his hand caressed her hair and shoulders. Then moved downwards to cup
her breast over her silky soft nightgown, his thumb teasing her nipple. She arched into his touch as
he moved his lips to her cheek then brought it to her earlobe. He bit down gently, grinning as she
shuddered and cried out underneath him. He then kissed and sucked at her jawline, his tongue
tracing the delicate bones under her skin and tasting the faint saltiness of sleep sweat and that
enigmatic something that was Felicity.

He brought his mouth to her throat and groaned at her scent and taste, at hearing her mouth fall open
with a gasp as he kissed, licked, and sucked at the pale delicate flesh. He moved down even further,
kissing and lapping at her chest, his tongue tracing concave jewel of her collarbone, causing her to shiver and cry out.

“So beautiful,” he hummed against her. He reached down near her ankles, his fingers slipping under the hemline of her nightgown, then inched up her leg as he caressed her silky soft skin. When he got to her knee he traced his thumb over the crease behind the joint and chuckled as she jumped and shivered. “Ticklish?”

“Yes,” she complained mockingly, pulling at him until he rose above her to take her lips once more.

His fingers made their way slowly up her thighs as he smiled against her, “What do you suppose I’ll find…” his fingers slipped between her legs to brush against her damp heat, “Oh, you did miss me, didn’t you?” He chuckled.

“Smug bastard,” she gasped out as his fingers teased against her.

“Hmm,” he hummed, sucking and kissing at her throat again as his fingers drew through the moisture of her want. “I certainly am that.”

He parted her, his thumb teasing her hood aside to uncover the tiny sensitive bundle of nerves that made her buck and cry out underneath him. With his other hand he lifted her up from the mattress then removed his hand from between her thighs long enough to tug her nightgown up and off where it hit the floor with barely a whisper of sound.

He cupped her cheek as he leaned down to kiss her again, his palm running down her side to her hip then her outer thigh, so he could draw her leg against him as he ground his now very hard shaft against her center. She cried out and he silenced her with another harder kiss, swallowing her sounds of pleasure as he decided that he was done with teasing her for the moment.

“Please,” she whimpered as if reading his mind and he inhaled sharply, a savage lust clenching deep inside his belly at the sound of her need.

He maneuvered his hips and pressed upwards, driving into her heat and filling her. Her head fell back against the pillow, eyes shut tight, her mouth open in a silent cry as he pushed in deep. He watched her expression as the overwhelming need to possess, to own, to claim her almost overwhelmed his senses. He reached underneath her, cupping her buttocks, and pulled her hard against him then dug his toes into the mattress as he thrust deep again and again.

“Oh God, Bruce!” She shouted as he pushed inside her as far as he would go. He felt hot moisture rush and drip over his own heated flesh, coating him in her want, and he growled in pleasure.

No other woman had ever responded to him as completely she did. No other woman had ever felt as right as she did when he held her in his arms. It was like they were made for one another, like she belonged there, like he was the missing part of her and she was what kept his soul intact. They just seemed to fit; two halves, one whole.

As her muscles clamped around him and his head began to swim with his own quickly approaching orgasm, he thought; home.

Home was inside of this woman. His home, his woman.

His.

She was his home.
He moaned, his eyes closing as he tried to keep it together but she was so tight, so hot, so *right*. Her nails dug into his back as he drove deeper and deeper, losing his rhythm and control as she dripped around him making sounds that would drive any man mad.

The tightness curled in his belly and he started to lose his ability to focus on anything else but the feel of her. His last conscious thought before giving in to the demands of his body was that he should have never let her go. That this feeling could have been his four years ago and every day since.

This is what he had denied himself for the last four years but never again. He was never, ever letting her go again. No more out of town trips without her beside him, no more nights spent in separate beds, no more.

Right here, right now, he thought. This was how he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

“Tell me you’re mine,” he gasped against her lips, some ancient thing drawing the words from deep within him to the surface. “Baby, please!”

“Yes,” she sobbed and he let go.

With a roar he came, his every muscle straining as what felt like months of anticipation and need were finally met. He shut his eyes tight against the almost painful eruption of pleasure, lights flickering behind his eyelids as he heard her cry out as well.

It was powerful, awe inspiring, and he felt almost insignificant as he realized just how important she had become to him.

“God,” he sagged against her, his face buried against her throat as they caught their breath. He felt her cool fingers trace the muscles and scars on his back and shuddered within her, the last bursts of his seed finding their place within her womb. He moved his head until his lips pressed against her throat, “I love you,” he said breathlessly.

“I love you,” she returned in a whisper of breathless sound that had him moving to kiss her again.

His lips skimmed hers gently, the need for more oxygen taking precedence over the need to claim. He lifted his head and looked at her, his eyes tracing over the hollows of her cheeks and the deep blue of her eyes, still dark from passion and sleep as they took him in as well.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said in hushed amazement and he stroked his fingers down her petal soft cheek. “Everything about you is so goddamn…I missed you so much, you have no idea.”

“You act like you’ve been gone for a million years,” she said teasingly.

“It feels like I’ve been gone for a million years,” he said swallowing the lump in his throat as he looked at her. Words he had no intentions of saying bubbled up from his throat, “Marry me.”

“I already said I would,” she reminded him gently.

“Now,” he told her. “Marry me now.”

“I could but I doubt it would be legal,” she laughed softly as she lifted herself up to meet his kiss.

“I mean marry me today,” he said into her mouth, their breath merging and becoming one. “Marry me right now.” His teeth teased her bottom lip before soothing it with his tongue. “Let’s get dressed and get on the jet and just get married right now.”
“Wow, you really did miss me,” she said in drowsy delight.

“I did,” he agreed feeling lighter and happier than he had for a very long time. Possibly even forever. “But I mean it, I want to be your husband right now. I don’t want to wait even one more day.”

She took a deep breath then looked at him, her eyes drawing to half-mast from exhaustion and satisfaction. He half expected her to argue with him but instead she said, “What about my dad and the big fancy wedding with all the press releases we’re supposed to be planning six months from now?”

“I don’t care,” he said almost giddily. “I don’t care about any of it. We’ll do it again for everybody else but I want this to be just for us.”

“Oh yeah?” She asked, shifting her weight and encouraging him to roll over onto his back then following him until she was propped up against his chest, her lips teasing his lightly. “Just us, huh?”

“Just us,” he promised.

“A secret wedding with just the two of us?” She grinned against his own upturned lips. “I can be the secret Mrs. Wayne so everyone can think that we’re sneaking around being all scandalous together when, in reality, we’ll be an old married couple by the time everyone else thinks we’re ‘official’?”

“A secret wedding,” he agreed, “but not a secret marriage. I don’t want to hide you from the world, Mrs. Felicity Wayne. I want you in my home and by my side every step of the way from here on out. I want to be able to show everybody you’re mine.” He rolled them over again, the covers now a twisted tangle but he couldn’t have cared less. His lips found hers twice more before he spoke again, “I want to wake up with you in our bed every morning.” His fingers teased over one rosy nipple, watching it tighten against his fingers before moving around the swell of her breast, “I never want your head to hit the pillow unless I’m there beside you. I want to wake up to the sound of your breathing and the smell of your perfume.” His hand moved lower, first tracing then lightly dipping inside her navel, “I want to make lots and lots of babies with you.”

“Babies, huh?” She said, catching his fingers with hers and tangling them together against her flat stomach.

“I never thought I’d ever want that but right now, the idea of you…” he swallowed and leaned down to kiss the fragile skin under her belly button and just over her sex, “I want this; all of it. I want it more than anything.” He lifted his head and looked at her, a profound silence washing over them both, “Marry me.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Okay?” He said, his smile broadening. “Really?”

She wrinkled her nose at him, “Not today, but yes.”

“Why not?” He asked, capturing her lips again. “Why not right now? We can be married in a few hours and then I’ll take you anywhere you want to go for our honeymoon for as long as you want. To hell with the real world; let’s just run.”

“What about work or the mission?” She asked in between kisses.

“Screw the mission,” he whispered. “Screw work, screw everything; we have all the time in the world for that. Let’s just do it, I’m sick of waiting.”
“Really?” She chuckled, her cheeks growing pink and her dimples standing out emphasizing the delicate structure of her face.

“I have never been as off my game as I was for the last couple of days without you,” he told her, his thumbs tracing the small indentions signaling her happiness. “I was…God, I was such a mess even your father was shaking his head by the time I made it back to our hotel. If I wasn’t sure I was ready to retire before, I’m definitely sure now. I’m lucky I didn’t get myself killed, that’s how distracted I was.”

Her smile vanished and she looked at him in concern, “Are you okay? Did something happen?”

“I’m fine,” he promised. “For once I was on the sidelines during all the fighting.”

“Really?” She said disbelievingly.

“Really,” he assured her. “In related news, I met Superman.”

“You did?” She said in surprise.

He hummed his assent against her lips as he kissed her teasingly, “I’ll tell you all about it later but right now I just want to enjoy us for a while.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“Okay?” He laughed, “I half expected you to pester me with a million and one questions.”

“Nope,” she said, popping the ‘P’ adorably.

“So you’re not the least bit curious about the fact that I met a real life alien last night?” He chuckled. “I find that very hard to believe, Mrs. soon-to-be Wayne.”

“Yeah, I’m…kind of over alien encounters at the moment,” she said with an almost pained expression.

“That’s right,” he teased looking down at her, “You supposedly had an alien visitor of your own! What did you tell me over the phone? A little green Martian came over for cookies and milk?” He chuckled.

She bit her lip and gave him a sheepish look, “Not quite; Martian, yes, little, no. Apparently Martians are…big. Green, but big, and fond of dogs.” She cleared her throat. “As for the milk and cookies?” She puffed out her cheeks and exhaled roughly, her lips blowing out a raspberry, “Let’s just say that if Superman ever comes over for dinner we’re skipping dessert.”

He looked down at her dead pan expression and snorted, “You really are something else, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told,” she agreed.

He kissed her again, “So do you want your presents now or later?”

“I thought I already got my present,” she said huskily.

“That was the gift that keeps on giving,” he promised, brushing his lips lightly over hers. “One you can unwrap as many times you like for the rest of our lives.”

“Oh yeah?”
“Hmm,” he said, moving his mouth to her earlobe and nipping it lightly causing her skin to break out into goosebumps. “But what I was referring to are the presents I got you while I was gone.”

“You had time to go shopping while you were in Metropolis?” She asked in surprise.

“No,” he said sheepishly, moving off of her long enough to grab both of the large shopping bags off the floor and move them onto the bed, “I did, however, call my cousin and have her open up Killinger’s for Alfred so I could get you something to say I’m sorry for acting like an ass.”

“Oh wow,” she said, looking at the brightly wrapped packages as they spilled out of the large bags and onto the bed, “If you’re going to buy me presents every time you act like an ass, you might come out cheaper just buying the store.”

“Smart ass,” he said without any real heat and handed her one of the boxes. “Open it.”

She tore open the paper with a grin as he rolled off her to prop himself against the headboard. He helped her scoot up and wrapped his arm loosely around her then grinned as she looked at what was inside the box incredulously.

“You got me bunny slippers?” She said, pulling the brightly colored Marc Jacobs slippers out of the box and looking at them.

“Yup. They didn’t have any killer bunnies but I bought a pair in every color they had,” he told her.

“Why would you get me bunny slippers?” She said laughing giddily.

“I knew you’d like them,” he told her. “Your dad suggested I get you flowers but I thought that was a bit too trite and ordinary for us, and I thought about getting you jewelry but I knew that would just make you mad--”

“You could have given it a shot though,” she joked.

He rolled his eyes at her, “Anyway, you’re always going on about how cold your feet are and stealing my socks so I thought; bunny slippers.”

“How many pairs did you get?” She asked, digging through the bags and pulling out box after box.

“I don’t know, a bunch.” he told her. “I never realized bunny slippers were all that popular before. Kate got you some of every brand they had and when I mentioned the cat shoes you wore back in Starling she got you some of those, as well.”

“You got me shoes, too?” She asked tearing open another package, her mouth falling open in surprise when she pulled out a low pair of regular flats with an embroidered cat face on the toe and a pair of red leather glasses perched on its nose. “I can’t believe you remembered I wore Charlotte Olympia cat shoes that day.”

“I didn’t,” he told her. “I mean, I remembered the shoes but I didn’t know what the hell they were called.” He used his fingertips to turn her face toward him and kissed her lightly, “More specifically I remembered taking them *off* you.”

“That day wasn’t exactly a good memory for either of us though,” she said a little sadly even though she was still clutching the whimsical shoes to her chest.

“What happened later wasn’t, but making love to you that day…?” He kissed her again, this time lingering on her taste before pulling away, “I can’t think of a better memory than that.”
She looked up at him, not breathing, still as stone, “Do you really want to get married? Just do it?”

He nodded, his own body growing still as hope blossomed from some once barren field within his chest, “Yes.”

“Can I tell you something first?” She asked him. “I know we said we’d talk later but I just need to tell you this one thing.”

“Go ahead,” he told her, pushing aside the thrum of apprehension he felt at her words.

“I want to run my own team.”

“What?” He said in confusion. Of all the things she could have told him, that’s not what he was expecting to hear.

“I mean, I am. I’m running my own team,” she said a bit more assertively. “Now. I… I have a team now and I don’t want to give it up.”

“You want to continue working at Orbital?” He said furrowing his brow.

“No, I mean…,” she bit her bottom lip between her teeth and suddenly he found himself distracted once again. “I mean, I don’t think Orbital is going to work out but my team, the team I made there….” She looked at him, “You remember when you asked me to marry you and said that you wanted to take a more administrative role in running the team?”

“What about it?”

“I’ve been thinking a lot and I decided you were right about something. I can handle myself in a fight —”

“Baby…”

“No, wait,” she said, her hand on his chest comfortingly, “What I’m trying to tell you is that even though I can handle myself, I’m not a mask; at least not the kind that puts on armor and swings from rooftops,” she told him. “My strengths lie behind a monitor, like you said. I mean, I know I could eventually do what an operator does if I trained for it, but I’m a mission tech and a strategist; it’s what I do best. Running a team, thinking on my feet, hacking, getting it done; if I ever had to go out in the field I could, but most of what I do can be done from a Watchtower or LAIR workstation.”

“Okay,” he said slowly.

“What I was thinking is that we could take that idea you had and create our own version of Orbital that we could run together,” she suggested.

“Together?” He frowned.

“As partners,” she told him. “You run the Bats and I run the Birds.”

“Did you just say ‘the Birds’?” He asked in confusion.

“That’s my team; the Birds of Prey,” she told him.

“The Birds of Prey?” He absorbed that for a moment, “And what did you mean by I’d run the Bats and you’d run the Birds? If I retire then Dick will become the Bat.”

“That’s the other thing,” she said slowly.
“What?”

“You and Dick should talk but I honestly don’t think he wants your cowl.”

He chuckled incredulously, “The cowl is all he’s ever wanted, believe me,” he objected.

She shook her head, “All he’s ever wanted is to prove himself to you but that armor, that’s a part of you; you made the Batman yourself just like Nightwing is something he made for himself. Like I said, you two have to talk but, while he might take the mission he should be allowed to do it as Nightwing, not as Batman.”

“Who would take the Bat then?” He frowned.

“Why can’t you just keep it?” She suggested lightly, “I never… I never asked you to give it up, Bruce.”

“Baby, I told you…”

“I know,” she said quietly, “But we both know you’ll never be able to give it up forever. Eventually you’ll need to put it on, or *want* to put it on even if only occasionally, and I’m fine with that.”

He sat back against the headboard, drawing his knee up as he ran a frustrated hand through his hair, “Did Dick say he didn’t want it anymore? I mean, is he…” he looked down at the comforter, “Is it that he doesn’t want to stay in Gotham or--?”

She placed her small hand against his chest comfortingly once again, “No, like I said, he wants to stay in Gotham, at least I think so, but he’s not you. That armor is yours, not his. You made the Bat into this city’s guardian but now it’s Dick’s turn and, if you really want him to take over the mission, then it needs to be *his* mission, not yours.”

He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, “Dick never told me he didn’t want the cowl.”

“Like I said, I’m not trying to speak for Dick, but…” She scooted closer to him and his hand automatically wrapped tighter around her waist, “You mentioned that idea you had to form a Batman Incorporated kind of thing?”

“I wasn’t going to keep that name, but yes,” he admitted carefully.

“If I run the Birds here out of Gotham then who’s to say the two teams can’t work together?” She asked. “Not just with the Bats either; why can’t we offer Oliver’s team the same kind of assistance every once in a while?” Her eyes captured his, “You wanted to take the Bat global; why not try it here first with our three teams working as one, trading people back and forth for different missions just like Orbital?”

“So would you want me to lead it or just fund it?” He asked her.

“Both, but I would lead my team, Oliver his, and you yours, and we’d meet in the middle for the rest.”

He thought about that for a minute. It wasn’t a bad idea but…

“And when you said you’d ‘lead’ your team…?” He asked her.

“Just what I said; I would be the leader of the Birds. It would be my show.”

“And what if you do have to go into the field?” He frowned.
“Then I will,” she said easily.

His eyebrows drew together at that, “We said we wanted to start a family.”

“That doesn’t have to change,” she told him. “Look, between Katana and Sara the team should be okay without me in the field most of the time and, if they can’t lead and I do get pregnant or we adopt, then you or someone else can go out for me. That’s what I meant by sharing the load; with as many resources and people as we have, no one should have to sacrifice having a life in order to run the mission. I mean, in all those stupid sports movies they’re always saying that there’s no ‘I’ in team; who says that one person has to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders? They shouldn’t have to; not as long as there’s someone there, someone they can trust to help when they need it.”

“And the Birds? You plan on putting Katana in charge when they’re in the field?” He asked carefully.

“In the field, yes,” she told him. “I’d also have Sara as well. If I needed to send both of them out on different missions and I couldn’t go, then you could or someone else; it would be a partnership, like a business merger. Three separate teams but all running under one banner.”

“That…could work,” he agreed. “I thought about recruiting Katana anyway.”

“That said, I need to make one thing very clear up front,” she told him. “Until this Orbital business is done, we continue as we have and only I give my team orders.”

He looked at her cautiously, “Go on.”

“After all this we’ll all need to get together; me, you, and Oliver, and figure out a way to make all three teams work so that we can be separate but equal. You run the Bats, I run the Birds, he runs Team Arrow, but we keep the lines of communication open and work toward a common good just like Orbital. For the most part, we do our own thing, but if the situation calls for it like, say, the League shows up in Starling, we send back up while keeping some of the team here and vice versa. If Arkham implodes and all hell breaks loose, Team Arrow and the Birds can be here to help. After those missions are completed though, we go back to separate but equal again.”

“Would Queen go for that?” He said guardedly.

“Yes,” she said without hesitating, “but here’s the deal; you can’t try to muscle in on his team or mine, Bruce. This won’t work unless you agree to work with each other and with me; no more trying to control everything, can you do that?”

He considered that for a moment. “So just to clarify, what you’re basically saying is that this would be a Knights of the Round Table kind of thing where no one ranks higher than anyone else?” He said, his mind already tripping through all the possibilities. “We keep each other updated and exchange information every once in a while but, until we need to come together, we each keep to our own sandbox.”

“Yeah, only more than that. I thought about…it would be more like a…” she paused, “a kind of exchange club or league.”

“A league?” He repeated dubiously.

She grinned mischievously, “Why not? I was joking with Tam and Sara a few weeks ago about starting our own version of the League only ours would be the Justice League instead of the League of Assassins.”
“The Justice League?” He snorted.

“I even came up with an off the cuff marketing idea where we’d license our own action figures and Saturday morning cartoon shows to generate positive spin and income to fund various missions and projects like Orbital does with their Stellmoor holdings. Imitation is the best form of flattery, right? Also, if things go as I think they might and we shut Orbital and Stellmoor down, Oliver’s going to need someone to take those shares from QC off the market in order to protect his business. There’s no way he can afford them now, he’s already leveraged to the hilt. If we do have to take Stellmoor or Orbital out all that’ll happen is some other corporate raider will muscle in and he’ll be screwed,” she said reasonably. “Instead I thought we could figure something out between Wayne Enterprises and Queen Consolidated, maybe a kind of mini-merger in a separate tech venture we could use to help expand Watchtower on the side, that way he’d have his own version of Dr. Snyder’s R&D lab so it doesn’t look like QC is undergoing yet another hostile takeover. By ‘merging’ you’d be combining the missions, helping his company, as well as increasing the value of both Wayne and Queen stock.”

Damn, he thought proudly.

“What would we call it?” He asked.

“I don’t know,” she frowned, shaking her head. “It couldn’t have Wayne on it because, eventually, I know Oliver would want to buy his shares back and you wouldn’t want to leave your name behind because rebranding is a pain in the ass. Then again, it would also have to be separate from Queen, so maybe something with just initials? I don’t know; you guys can work all that out later. What do you think though?”

His eyebrows rose in surprise, “That’s not a bad idea actually. I already had a similar idea in regards to the Stellmoor situation. This league idea of yours has merit as well. I don’t know about doing publicity and marketing with the missions as the Arrow might be a hard sell given his past as the Hood, but I have to admit there’s already a lot of tourist garbage on the streets for the Bat so maybe it’s not completely out in left field. As we recruit new members, maybe someone like the Flash with a more positive TVQ we could see how it goes, maybe come up with something down the line through Wayne Entertainment.”

“So that’s a yes?” She asked him.

He grimaced, “It’s a definite maybe. I’d have to talk to Queen first and we’re not exactly on the best of terms so the idea of getting in bed with him permanently both in business and in the mission is…?”

“Okay, look, everyone’s coming over here tonight for dinner anyway. We can have a briefing with Oliver and our two teams then you two can discuss the rest and come up with some kind of understanding afterwards?” She suggested.

“Why is everyone coming here for dinner?” He frowned.

“We missed Thanksgiving this past year and Laurel wanted to have a turducken,” she told him. “Plus it will give us a chance to introduce everyone and come up with a game plan.” She must have seen his reticence in his expression because she added, “I trust my people, Bruce, and I hope you trust me. Besides, most of the team is made up from people you and Oliver already know; Wildcat, Katana, Lyla, Sara, Gypsy…other people…” she said glancing away.

“True,” he said. “Okay.”

“Okay?” She repeated hopefully.
“We’ll give it a shot,” he said wryly. “Of course, if we’re having a February Thanksgiving tonight we can’t exactly hop the jet to Niagara Falls later, can we?”

“Sunday is Valentine’s Day,” she said slowly.

He looked at her in confusion, “What?”

“I’ve never been able to celebrate Valentine’s Day before,” she told him with a shrug. “Might be nice to do something special that day for a change.”

He looked at her carefully, “You want to get married Sunday? This Sunday?”

“We got engaged on a Sunday,” she said quietly. “Plus the Gala is on Saturday so we can go straight from the event to wherever you want afterwards.”

“Are you sure?” He said in surprise.

“Are you changing your mind?” She asked in return.

“No,” he said cupping her cheek and kissing her softly. “No.” He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers, “I just thought you wanted to wait. I…”

“I did,” she told him, her own fingers coming up to caress his cheeks, rasping against the shadow of his beard.

“Not that I’m trying to talk you out of it, but what changed?” He asked her, pulling away slightly so he could see her expression.

“I don’t know, I…” Her brow furrowed, “It’s possible to have a mission and a life, right?” At his silence she said, “I mean, we can figure it out; be happy. It doesn’t have to be one or the other as long as we’re in it together, right?”

“We can definitely try,” he promised her. “The league idea you came up with could go a long way to making that happen if we can get everyone on the same page.”

“And you’ll fight for me?” She asked him, her eyes pleading. “You won’t just give up the first time something goes wrong and decide it’s too hard? Because something always goes wrong, Bruce. I don’t want to jump in with both feet if you’ve barely even got a toe in the water.”

“Always,” he said, kissing her forehead gently. “I will always fight for us even if the world is going to hell all around us, I promise.”

“And you won’t push me away, not even if you think it’s for my own good?” She asked. “If we do this you have to be all in, 100%; no takesies backses or cold feet after the fact.”

He took a deep breath and looked down at her. He picked the bags and boxes up off the rumpled duvet, setting them off the bed as she watched in silence waiting for his answer, then placed his hands on her shoulders, gently encouraging her to lay back against the pillows. He slid his hand under her head and pulled her long hair off her neck, carefully fanning it out around her like a halo before speaking.

“Four years ago I had you in my bed,” he said carefully, his fingers toying with her hair as he stretched out beside her, “You were…unexpected,” he chuckled lightly. “I never planned for you so you took me off-guard and that’s not exactly something I’m used to. I always have plans, I’m a planner. I have strategies and counter-strategies, worst case scenarios, Doomsday contingencies,
plans A through Z followed by one through one hundred, and protocols for damn near any and everything...except you,” he told her.

“Falling in love with you was quite possibly the first and only time I had ever leapt head first into something without even knowing where we were going to end up. I watched you sleep and...” He shook his head, his eyes tracing her face, “After we’d make love, you’d lay your head against my chest, whisper ‘I love you’ thinking I couldn’t hear you, and I’d just...stare.” He smiled as one of her curls seemed to surround his finger like a band of gold. He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering her then and swallowed, “I’d touch your face and wonder how time would change you, how you’d look in a year, five years, ten years, and I wondered what it would be like to be the man who had the...privilege of being beside you through all that. I wondered what it would be like to hold your hand, to kiss you in front of our friends and family, to see you as you grew our child inside of you and be there when he or she was born.”

He looked at her solemnly, “You made me dream, Felicity, and I’m not a dreamer. I’m not the kind of man who ever allowed himself to dream before. You scared me,” he said simply. “You terrified me because,” he took a deep breath, “the Bat can’t live in the light and that’s what you were to me; what you still are. You’re everything good and pure in this entire universe and I…I didn’t deserve you.” He dropped his head slowly until his lips were hovering just above hers, his voice lowering to a whisper, “I didn’t deserve you then and I still don’t, but I swear to you that I will do whatever it takes to make you happy for the rest of our lives and I’m never, ever letting go or pushing you away ever again.”

Her eyelids fluttered closed and he kissed her. “I love you,” he said after his lips gently parted from hers, “and I’ll marry you whenever and wherever you want me to, whether it’s six months from now or six years, or even six hours; I will never let go. Not again; not ever. No matter what it takes I will keep you and the family we create together safe, and I will never let you go ever again.”

“Sunday,” she told him at last.

“You’re sure?” He asked her.

She nodded, “But just us. I don’t…I don’t want to tell anyone or invite anyone else in; not yet.”

“Not that I’m complaining, but can I ask why?” He asked teasingly as he kissed a line down her neck.

“I need something real, something tangible,” she said, her hands curling in his hair. “I’m tired of...”

“Of what?” He asked her as he smoothed her hair from her face.

“I want to belong somewhere,” she told him. “I want to be...real and human.” She gave him a sad smile, “Anything could happen; anything. The world could end at any second now and I don’t want to live in limbo anymore. I’m ready for the clocks to go forward again so I can begin to live the rest of my life with someone.”

“Someone?” He asked.

“You,” she said firmly.

“Sunday,” he agreed then kissed her again.

“And, as I pointed out earlier,” she said, her expression warming, “after the Gala you’ll already be in a tux and I’ll be in a gown, the Gala is going to be just downstairs so we can already have our bags waiting here, we can go straight from the party, pick them up, then drive ourselves to the airport. We
“Don’t even have to bother with that cake you were fussing about; we’ll just grab a doggie bag on our way out.”

“Very practical and romantically un-romantic,” he praised, chuckling softly.

“I figured you’d appreciate that,” she yawned. He kissed her forehead then slipped in behind her, pulling her tight against his chest as he kissed her ear teasingly.

“Sleep,” he told her, their heads sharing a pillow as he nuzzled his face against her soft fragrant hair.

“I have so much to tell you, though,” she said thickly, her eyes already falling shut. “Maybe we should just…?”

“Sleep now, talk later,” he told her, sleep pulling at his eyelids as well. “It can wait, Baby. For once we have all the time in the world,” he said, smiling against her hair.

“Liar,” she said laughing at him.

“Maybe,” he agreed, “but I’m not going anywhere and neither are you.”

“I love you,” she said, already slowly drifting away.

“I love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

For those of you tempted to call me out on the way I chose to introduce J’onn to the Super Friends, for your education and edification, ladies and gentleman, I present CANON (Yeah, I couldn't make this shit up if I tried):
AND THEN THERE WAS THE TIME DURING THE JUSTICE LEAGUE INTERNATIONAL ERA WHEN I LOST MY COOKIES.

I THINK I WILL HAVE SOME CHOCOS.
WHO, ME?

WHO, HIM?

WHO, US?

NOTHING!

DON'T GIMME THAT! I KNOW THOSE LOOKS!

YOU TWO!

GUY GARDNER!

OKAY OR YOU WILL WE STOLE J'ONN'S COOKIES!
DON'T YOU GET IT? JONN IS CRAZY FOR THOSE CHOCOS! HE HAD BAGS OF 'EM, STUFFED ALL OVER THE EMBASSY! IT'S LIKE HE'S ADDICTED!

AND IT JUST GETS FUNNIER!

WE mmff!
WE WENT OFF AND BOUGHT mmff: ALL THE CHOCOS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD!

YOU CAN'T mmff: YOU CAN'T BUY A BAG OF CHOCOS mmff: FOR AT LEAST A MILE RADIUS OF THE BUILDING!
WELL, I THINK YOU'RE JUST MEAN!

NO NO NO! J'onn wants us to do things like this! We're teaching him to be a regular guy!

MAYBE WE WILL ASK HIM THAT, EH? I THINK HE IS COMING NOW FROM THE KITCHEN.

J'onn? You are okay?

This is going to work, right? I mean, what's the purpose of playing a gag like this on J'onn if we can't see his reaction?
ABSOLUTELY. I'VE JACkED OUR MONITOr SYSTEM INTO ALL OF THE SECURITY CAMS IN ALL THE LOCAL FOOD STORES AND DELIS. ALL WE HAVE TO FIGURE'S WHICH ONE JOHN IS...

BWA-HA-HA-HA! OH MAN, THIS IS GREAT!

UHMM... I'M NOT SURE. TAKE ANOTHER LOOK.

MARS NEEDS CHOcOS!

WHERE ARE THE CHOcOS?

WE'RE GOING TO GET YELLED AT AGAIN, AREN'T WE?
EASY, BIG GUY. EASY!

J'onn don't want stupid pastry wafers! J'onn want chocolates!

BRING J'onn COOKIES!

Frendz?

Yeah, that's right! We're your friends!

You got cookies, Frendz? J'onn can't find his cookies! SNIFF!

Geez, J'onn—we're sorry. Had we known this was going to happen, we'd never have taken them in the first place.

Whopsie.

Hey, J'onn—how's it goin', guy?

You know us, don't you? Booster and Beetle? We're your buddies, big guy! We're your friends!
A single dog bone is on the table. Which von long to 13 bone on the table.

The no 39 is not bothered.
Okay, I have been searching and I think I may have found our Bruce. Granted he's not what I would pick for myself (I'm partial to blonds in real life) but he is the closest to the comic I could find and he's about the right age and body type. ladies and germs, Richard Armitage! Let me know in the comments if you agree or disagree and why and also feel free to go back through previous chapters because the art has changed! Enjoy part one of Friendsgiving for the happy respite wont last long. Mwah hah hah hah hah!

Also, this is the official theme song for the parts in italics. This would be played in a montage right before the scene starts, leading up to the confrontation.

Thanks!

---Jen
Chapter Fifty-Seven

“Tell me about Slade.”

They managed to sleep off and on until just after ten o’clock when the sounds of the workmen began to filter through the door, but they didn’t bother leaving the room. They got up, took a long shower that was less about sex and more about tenderness, then got back into bed. Actually, Bruce had been very affectionate with her since he’d come home; more than usual, in fact. He’d always treated her like something that took precedence and care, but he’d never treated her like glass before and it was a bit disconcerting.

Not that she didn’t enjoy it; gentle was fine. It just wasn’t Bruce. Bruce was a bit rough and passionate; she liked that about him actually. With every other aspect of his life he was so in control, except with her. With her he was a little wild, a little rough, and more his true self than he ever was either in or out of the cowl.

As strange as it sounded, it often felt like he was three separate men; Bruce Wayne was crisp shirts and impeccable tailoring, Batman was raw unbridled anger and absolute control, but Bruce? Bruce was wicked smiles and teasing touches, passionate lovemaking and pigheadedness to the point of madness. He was both raw and closed up and he could frustrate her more than anyone in the entire world with the exception of Oliver, but with Bruce she always knew where she stood.

But, right now, it felt like she was standing on a precipice. There was a wariness to his gaze she didn’t like because it made her think he thought she was breakable. Yes, he was overprotective at times but he never looked at her like…like she was completely broken before; like one harsh word could cause her to shatter into a million pieces. Or maybe she was overthinking it. Maybe he wasn’t looking at her like that, maybe she was just seeing her own fear reflected back at her because that’s what she expected to see.

The fear that maybe she had lost her mind, for a little while at least.

“I don’t…” she began, closing her eyes.

The words were on the tip of her tongue: I don’t want to talk about it.

Words she’d been saying for a little over six months; words that had worked with everyone else so far, except Bruce.
He reached out and pulled her into his arms, then kissed her hair. “Just talk to me.”

She laughed a little, pulling away slightly, then swallowed. “That sounds so easy, doesn’t it?” She said quietly. “Just talk? I’m the girl who babbles, right? I should be able to talk with no problem.”

I don’t want to talk about this, she thought. I really just don’t want to.

She didn’t even want to have to think about it.

“How about I start?” He asked her as he leaned against the headboard. He was clad only in a towel that sat low on his waist, while she was in nothing but a thin robe but she wasn’t cold. She wasn’t anything; just numb.

“Can we just not do this, please?” She said in a near whisper.

“Baby, not talking about it isn’t helping you,” he told her in a voice that, while gentle, made it clear that he would be getting his way.

She shivered and shook her head, “No.”

“I’ll start,” he repeated.

“No.” She didn’t want to talk about that day, she never wanted to talk about that day. She knew she had to, had to face the madness of what happened, see the reaction on his face when she told him, but she didn’t want to. She wasn’t afraid to tell him, actually she was…angry.

Was ‘angry’ the right word? She mused. No, but it was close. Lots of words were close but none quite fit her emotional state that day: angry, terrified, frustrated, impotent, disgusted, destroyed, hurt…sad.

Confused.

She could throw a dictionary at it and never find the right words, but that didn’t seem rational either so she just wanted to see what he’d say instead.

He ignored her, “Detective Lance and the rest of Queen’s team told them about the lead up. I know about Slade being on Lian Yu, I know Malcolm Merlyn helped him escape, and I know about what happened in the tactical van.” As always, Bruce was hard and precise with his words as if reading his way down a list. It was another thing she appreciated about him. He had the same talent for not mincing his words as Lance had. She took in a deep breath and he waited until she expelled it slowly before continuing. “You told me about how you got to Slade and what happened, some of it anyway.” Another deep breath, another controlled exhale. “I know bits and pieces from there.” Now it was him who took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, the shadows clinging to his eyes as he spoke. “I know…”

He stopped.

She knew what he meant. She also knew what came next.

“Felicity…” he said slowly, his eyes meeting hers steadily, “I know you intended to take both you and Slade…I know about the explosive device…” he swallowed convulsively and wrapped his arms around her before breathing in a sharp breath, “Lance told Tim your plan.” His voice was deeper, huskier; not the Bat but not Bruce either. “You hit the detonator and the charges went off.” He pulled her close to his chest and laid a kiss on her hair. “I know the aftermath; that you got your team out. I need you to tell me about the missing time between the detonation of the charges and ARGUS
coming to airlift your team to the military hospital.”

“Did you know Ra’s had a son named Dusan?” She asked him. Why she threw that out there she didn’t know. Or maybe she did. For whatever reason though the ice had begun to form and she was numb. Her lips felt numb, her arms felt like they were floating, and her bones were cold.

They were cold and part of her wanted to laugh because Peggy Ann would make her soup and think that would fix it, but it wouldn’t. People always think broken things can be fixed but they can’t, not really. All wounds leave scars but hers had never healed. She was Humpty Dumpty and her egg was cracked; there was no fixing that.

“Baby,” he frowned, reaching out for her when she began to pull away.

“Did you know Ra’s had a son named Dusan?” She asked again through numb lips, her voice gone hollow.

“Yes,” he told her. “How do you know about him?”

“Isabel told me. Tell me about Ra’s again.”

“I’ve already told you about Ra’s,” he said carefully, his eyes searching her face for answers that weren’t there because she was a blank slate.


She saw him clench his jaw then look away for a second as if gathering his patience then looked back up at her, “I’ll tell you about Dusan after you tell me about Slade.”

She ignored him, “If Dusan was his son then why wasn’t he his heir?”

Bruce took another deep breath and leaned against the headboard, his head nodding slightly as if having some kind of internal discourse. “In order to tell you about Dusan I’d have to start at the beginning.”

“So start.”

“No,” he told her. “First you tell me about Slade.” When she remained steadfastly silent his brow furrowed, “Baby, just talk to me. I promise everything will be okay if you just tell me what happened.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I know,” he said quietly.

“Why can’t you just let it go?” She asked with a tinge of irrational anger. “Everyone else let it go, why can’t you?”

“Because you’re not letting it go,” he said simply but with a firmness that let her know she would not be winning this argument. “He’s your demon, Felicity; in order to exorcise demons, first they have to be exposed to the light of day.”

She looked down at the duvet, “It’s…”

“It’s what?”

“It’s none of your business,” she said in barely a whisper. She knew she sounded childish but she
didn’t care.

“It is my business!” He said, his eyebrows drawing together in anger.

“No,” she shook her head.

“Damn it, Felicity; you can’t keep living like this!” He told her. “You can’t keep bottling this up because, whether you see it or not, everyone else can, and it’s killing you by inches!”

“I can handle it,” she said, steadfastly refusing to meet his gaze.

“No, you can’t,” he said bluntly, “Deny it all you want to but you aren’t handling it, you haven’t been handling it, and unless you let this go it will continue to eat into your life.” He placed his hand on top of hers, “Listen to me; not confronting this gives Slade power over you, do you hear me? In order to defeat your deepest fears you have to stare them in the eye and so far all you’ve been doing is hiding. You need to stop hiding and end this once and for all.”

“Fine,” she said, her eyes flashing angrily, “I’ll tell you but you have to tell me about Dusan and Ra’s first,” she said stubbornly.

He looked at her warily, “Why?”

“I keep…” She closed her eyes, “There are…words, patterns, names that keep repeating over and over and none of it makes sense but all of it seems connected to Ra’s.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked at him and noticed that his expression, still tender, still concerned, had now taken on a look of intrigue as well.

“Luthor and Waller, Orbital and Miranda, you and Oliver; all of it revolves around Ra’s,” she said carefully. As soon as she said that, her mind began to sharpen once more and she began to warm up, “Slade, too; and Savant.”

“Savant?” Bruce repeated, stiffening slightly.

“You know him?”

“We’ve crossed paths,” he said grimly. “He tried his hat at being a mask for a while but he has a—”

“Chemical imbalance,” she finished.

“How do you know Savant?” Bruce asked, his mouth tensing into a grim line.

“The mission Miranda sent my team on was to retrieve Savant and Creote from where they were holed up in a safe house in Svyatoy Nos near Lake Baikal in Siberia but the League and ARGUS got there first.”

“Lake Baikal?” He said with a frown.

“Why? Is that significant?”

“I don’t know yet,” he told her. “Finish what you were saying; did they get captured?”

“No, they were gone already, but Miranda—Miranda Tate, she’s the head of Orbital and Isabel’s boss, “she explained.
“Katana and Wildcat filled me in on her,” Bruce nodded.

“Miranda wanted our team to retrieve them because both ARGUS and Ra’s have him on their most wanted list only, like I said, they were both long gone so my team had to do clean up instead.”

“Do you know why they both want him so badly? Beyond the obvious, of course,” he added.

“Alien bee pollen.”

“What?” Bruce asked giving her an incredulous look.

“I really don’t have enough time to go back through it all so I’ll give you the Reader’s Digest version,” she said with a sigh, “The organization known as HIVE were actually these bee aliens who wanted to create meta-humans so they could suck out our brains and insert their own consciousness inside us.”

“Wait; what?” He asked, looking at her like she was one yolk shy of an omelet.

She really needed to eat breakfast soon because she was beginning to play it a little too fast and loose with the egg metaphors.

“Just listen,” she told him. “It gets worse, trust me.” She took a deep breath, “Anyway, J’onn, this Martian cop, actually he called himself a Martian Manhunter, who has been here since the 1950’s;” He opened his mouth to speak and she held up a finger to stop him while she got out what she needed to say, “found out about these aliens and their plot to enslave humanity. He snuck on their ship and blew it up. He didn’t mean to blow it up, he just meant to cripple their drives, or warp engine, or whatever, but something wonky happened and everything went boom. Anyway, long story short, the Omega Device—”

“The Omega—!” He began with a scowl.

“I’ll explain the Omega Device later,” she promised.

“I already know about the Omega Device,“ he said with a growl of annoyance.

“You do?” She asked in surprise.

“Yes! In fact, I encountered it long before your team did,” he said curtly.

“Okay, so do you know about the alien bee pollen, too?” She asked him.

“No,” he said with a thunderous expression. “No, I don’t know about any goddamned alien bee poll- -!”

“Then shush!” she said, slapping her hand over his mouth and causing him to look at her in consternation, “The Omega Device, which was actually the damaged temporal engine singularity thingamajig, landed here! J’onn, the…big green Martian cop,” she said with helpless gesture accompanied with a grimace, “Anyway, he knew this sucker was bad news so he infiltrated ARGUS.” Bruce was clenching his jaw so tightly by now that she could almost hear his teeth creak but didn’t give him a chance to interrupt, “Now, while he was with ARGUS he was looking for any parts of this ship that may have made it to Earth and that’s how he found out about Slade and Merlyn stealing the Omega Device and it getting destroyed. Just as he was about to leave ARGUS and go back to his old identity, Orbital recruited him and that’s when he learned about the mind control pollen.”
“Mind control pollen,” he said in low, dark tones.

She nodded, “The Korilites, or the bee aliens, whatever you want to call them, had a hive mind, hence the name ‘HIVE’. The pollen the queen produces or creates through some artificial process, J’onn didn’t get into any of the details, must contain some kind of powerful neurotransmitter or toxin that allows her to control them and they’re all linked through some kind of hub. Waller and Luthor both have samples of this ‘pollen’ and they’ve been trying to reproduce it but haven’t been entirely successful yet. According to Miranda, Orbital wanted to get to the tech in order to destroy it before either Waller or Luthor could mass produce it. Meanwhile, Mallory,” Bruce tensed at the name, “hooked up with Miller to sell this tech to Ra’s—”

“What?!” He exploded.

“Shut up! Shut up, I’m on a roll!” She said, pointing a warning finger at him, “Now where was I?” She muttered. “Meanwhile, Mallory…oh! Meanwhile, Mallory and Miller got together to sell the tech to Ra’s so they staged the whole Lois Lane collapsing before the senate subcommittee like some kind of infomercial to seal the deal. Orbital, knowing Luthor had it but not where it was located, enlisted the Amazons—”

His eyebrows drew together at that, “Amazons?”

“Immortal super-powered women who are apparently really pissed off, at least according to Miranda,” she nodded. “I realize that sounds totally insane, but—”

“I actually might have met one last night,” he said resignedly.

“I…heard,” she admitted. “Well, not directly, but…”

“Are you saying that Miranda sent that woman into Lexcorp?” He asked her.

She nodded.

“Did she kill Mallory as well?”

“That I don’t know,” she admitted. “Miranda said she didn’t, but who knows. What she did say is that Isabel seduced Mallory to turn him into an asset.”

“Isabel was sleeping with Mallory?” He frowned.

“Yeah, apparently Mallory was into S&M and belonged to some underground clubs Isabel had the in with, so she hooked up with him in order to get the inside scoop on Luthor and Mallory, which is how Orbital came into this in the first place.” She paused, “That reminds me, I have to have a really uncomfortable talk with Oliver about…something.”

“What?” He asked, his eyebrows drawing together again but for different reasons.

“It’s…personal,” she sighed. “Not about us or the mission,” she assured him quickly, “It has to do with something personal to Oliver though, so I can’t tell you.”

“Alright,” he nodded reluctantly, “So did Isabel kill him?”

“Again, I asked the same question and Miranda said no. She claims that either Luthor did it or Miller did, but since Miller hasn’t delivered the tech to Ra’s, she’s betting Luthor.” She told him. “If Miller doesn’t get that tech and deliver it to Ra’s on schedule, he’ll hunt him to the ends of the earth and I doubt he’s dumb enough to kill the goose that laid the golden egg without, you know, actually
“getting an egg out of it first.”

“And these…aliens?” He said, forcing the word out.

“Dead,” she told him. “All of them died on the ship according to J’onn which is why HIVE went dark. It restarted because of Miller and Mallory’s deal but,” she said emphasizing the word, “the tech is still dangerous which is why Orbital was running three separate missions last night to retrieve it. First Isabel was supposed to bring in Mallory but he was already dead, then the Amazons were supposed to attack Luthor’s vault to retrieve the tech while other teams searched Mallory’s place and other known stash spots belonging to either Mallory or Luthor but came up empty, and last was the mission I ran last night to retrieve Savant because both ARGUS and Ra’s believe he knows where it is and Waller wants to protect that information while Ra’s just wants his product.”

“When did you find out about that part?” He asked her carefully.

“Not until after the mission was over,” she assured him. “But, again, there’s more.”

“Of course there is,” he said flatly.

“There’s two more things actually,” she admitted. “J’onn believes that Miranda has some of this mind control tech as well and is using it to control the Amazons.”

He frowned, “What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” she grimaced. “He doesn’t know either. He’s almost positive but if she is using mind control, she’s doing it to fight Ra’s. She’s definitely obsessed with taking him down so I can’t say.”

“Why is this Miranda so obsessed with Ra’s?” He asked her.

“She claims he murdered her entire family, including her children,” she told him. “Or, at least, the League did but he gave the orders.”

“Her children?” He frowned. “How old is Miranda?”

“Late twenties, early thirties at the most, why?”

“So her children would have been quite young,” he mused, his eyes troubled.

“Well, they are assassins,” she shrugged. “I mean, it’s disturbing, but I imagine they’ll kill anyone who has a contract put out on them, right?”

“No,” Bruce told her.

“No?” She said in surprise.

“No’s won’t kill children, not on purpose,” he told her. “He will in a way; he’ll release contagion or cause some other type of wide-spread destruction, but if they die of disease, or by indirect means, he considers that part of the cost associated with ridding the world of evil. It’s alright if it’s merely collateral damage because he can then lay the blame for the loss of those lives on the cancerous evil tainting whatever city or government he’s targeting, but he won’t intentionally murder children or pregnant women, nor would he accept a contract to do so. In fact, if any of his followers tried to accept a contract like that there would be severe consequences. That’s one of the reasons why I suspect he went after Merlyn; not only did he disobey his orders, but children died in that attack on the Glades. Disobeying him alone was a death sentence but the death of innocents would have made him a sworn enemy of the League. I know it seems counter-intuitive given how Ra’s would raze
whole cities at a time, but he’s been known to take children and infants who are still ‘uncorrupted’ and give them to his people to raise as soldiers in his army. He, himself, has taken on several children and has kept them close to serve as his personal guard. If this woman had small children, he wouldn’t have killed them; he would have kept them or left them if he was the one ordering the charge.”

“You said he’d kill his own children though.”

Bruce grimaced, “I don’t know that for sure; we only suspect it because of Talia and, if he did, he’d consider it euthanasia, not murder. Nyssa never had children, at least we don’t think so, because she was sterilized in a concentration camp during World War II.”

“What?” She said in a mixture of shock and surprise. “But Nyssa is only—!”

“She’s older than she looks, a lot older,” he told her. “She was born sometime in the mid 1800’s and her mother was one of Ra’s ‘chosen’. She joined Ra’s when she was old enough to train by his side but when the Nazi’s rounded up members of her family, she asked him and the League to intervene but he refused.”

“Why would he refuse that?” She said, feeling sick. “If he claims to hate evil so much then you’d think he would want to take out a man like Hitler personally.”

“Ra’s hated Hitler and what he represented but felt his presence was divine will and that nature would take care of him soon enough. In the meantime, he felt that the massive death toll he brought with him was merely nature righting itself.”

Her jaw dropped at that, “So Ra’s hates Jews, too?”

“No,” he told her. “He hates humanity as a whole, or rather the infection of evil that is spread by humanity. In fact, Nyssa’s mother was Jewish. She was of mixed descent, both his daughters were. She was part Asian, possibly either Mongolian, Taiwanese, or Chinese, and Russian, and Melisande, Talia’s mother, was of Indian, Chinese, and Jewish descent.”

She filed that away, “So how did Nyssa get sent to a concentration camp?”

“She tried to liberate her family and was caught then subjected to who knows what in addition to forced sterilization,” he said solemnly. “She finally saved herself but it caused a rift between them for years that has only been mended within the last decade or so. It’s one of the reasons why Nyssa chooses to think of the prophesy as symbolic since she can’t carry a child of her own.”

Felicity swallowed as her stomach clenched. She liked Nyssa, despite being an assassin and sometimes adversary. She’d been very kind to her the one time they’d actually spoken and Sara had mentioned that the other woman had a fondness for her as well. Now that she knew more of her story she couldn’t help but feel some measure of sympathy for her.

She shook off the emotions threatening to now cause tears to fall and continued on. “What about Damian?” She asked him. “You said Ra’s called him an ‘abomination’ and wanted him dead.”

“He didn’t want to kill Damian; he found him distasteful but he didn’t want him murdered. He wanted to use him as his ‘vessel’, remember?” He reminded her. “Talia killed Damian in order to prevent her father from getting to him.”

Felicity blanched at that but continued, “I saw her face, the way she spoke; she wasn’t faking that. I mean, she was hiding something for sure, but she genuinely believes he murdered her children. She specifically said he took her mother, her sister, and her children from her.”
“Did she say ‘take’ or ‘murder’?” He asked her.

Felicity thought back to their conversation.

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“He murdered my family,” Miranda said flatly. “My mother, my sisters, my brother…” she closed her eyes, “even my children.”

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“Murdered,” she answered him. “She said he murdered her mother, her sisters, and her brother, along with her children.”

“And you’re positive she was telling the truth?” He asked her.

Felicity hesitated, “Miranda…is hard to get a read on but, yes, I think she believes he did. She might not be rational about it and just be blaming him for their deaths, but I honestly believe she thinks he’s responsible. She even said that, even though he didn’t kill them directly, he was responsible for their deaths.” While he appeared to take that in, she asked, “So Ra’s won’t kill kids and that’s because of the whole anti-evil prophesy thing?”

“In part,” he hedged.

“And what’s the other thing?” She asked him.

“Felicity, you’re stalling,” he said not unkindly. “While all of that information was necessary and important, I also need to know about that day with Slade.”

“I wasn’t stalling…” she said avoiding meeting his eyes directly, “Not really.”

“Baby…” he sighed. “Look, I promise to tell you what you want to know, but first we need to talk about Slade and what happened.” He reached out for her hand and stroked his thumb over her fingers. “If I’m going to help you then I need to know what’s going on with you; I need to know all of it.”

“This connects to that,” she told him. “Slade said Savant was the information broker who told him Anthony Ivo was my father, but he lied.”

“Queen told me about that,” he said hesitantly. “Baby…Henri Ducard couldn’t possibly have been your father,” he said carefully. “I had Alfred get in contact with Charlotte in Paris and she hunted down a few of my old contacts. Henri Ducard is--”

“Dead,” she said, beating him to the chase. “Yeah, Dick said he found out a while back that he had end-stage pancreatic cancer a few years ago.”

He frowned, “Dick didn’t tell me that.”

“Yeah, well, this is what happens when people don’t communicate,” she told him. “You and Dick get your wires crossed and, in the meantime, had I told you my dad was Henri Ducard, you could have told me he was one of your old teachers. Although, given what Dick said about him, I doubt you would have been cool with arranging a daddy-daughter tea party between the two of us afterwards.”

“He wasn’t your father,” he told her. “He couldn’t possibly have been your father.”

“Yes, he was,” she returned, her voice equally confident in the facts.
“He couldn’t have been,” he told her. “At the time of your conception, he was in Paris. He never even left the country. Alfred checked and double checked. He even went through his old Intelligence contacts in Europe who were working in that area at the time and they all said the same thing; Henri Ducard was obsessed with bringing down the Algerians responsible for several bombings throughout Europe and the attempt on the Eiffel Tower. He never once left the country during the time your mother became pregnant with you.”

“They’re wrong.”

“Why? Because you don’t want to believe Anthony Ivo was your father or because you saw a file in Watchtower about Ducard’s wife?”

“No,” she told him, “because my mother said his name was Henri Ducard.”

He looked at her in surprise then frowned, his brow furrowing. “Baby, you weren’t even four years old when Evie died.”

“No, but she told Peggy his name was Henri Ducard and Peggy even saw him. She said he came to my mom’s old loft space back in Las Vegas and even dug his card out of the trash after he left. Hang on.” She got up and walked over to her purse, taking out her wallet. She slipped the now yellowed card from the protective plastic covering and padded back to the bed to hand it to him before sitting back down and tucking her legs underneath her.

Bruce looked at the relatively plain card which only contained the name ‘Henri Ducard’ in black embossed lettering and a number with a foreign exchange. “Have you tried tracing it or calling the number?”

“Not…not until a few months ago,” she admitted. “After that night, I tried calling it one time. I don’t know why.” She toyed with the ties of her robe as she spoke, “Anyway, it doesn’t matter, it’s a restaurant or something now. I even took a chance and asked if Henri Ducard worked there but they’d only been open for a few months and hadn’t heard of him,” she shrugged. “After that I just put it back in my wallet and forgot about it.”

“Did you try running a computer trace?”

She nodded, still not meeting his eyes, “On my tablet before I went to bed. Back then it was a restaurant, too, so either he was a chef or a waiter or something but I looked and there were no tax records or anything for any ‘Henri Ducard’ associated with that business. I’m pretty sure it was a fake,” she shrugged. “He probably had that made up and gave it to my mom in order to get out of paying child support.” She gave a humorless bark of laughter, “Joke’s on him, huh? Not only did she toss his card but she wound up marrying a billionaire and becoming a successful artist.”

“It may have been a different Henri Ducard,” he told her quietly. “It’s not that uncommon a name.”

“It’s more uncommon than you’d think,” she told him. “I looked that up, too. Peggy got a pretty good look at him; enough to eliminate a good chunk of the candidates and the only guy who fits is dead Daddy Assassin Ducard. Same approximate height, same age range, same hair color. She even said he had a vaguely European accent but she was too far away to place it.”

“It couldn’t have been him,” he told her again.

“So that means it had to have been Ivo?” She snorted, “Why not, right? Either way it’s a huge coincidence, don’t you think? Either he’s the guy who trained you, or he’s the guy who tortured Oliver. Talk about star-crossed,” she said hollowly. “Well, whatever; it doesn’t really matter because
he’s dead, too, so if I have to choose between two deceased psycho-daddies, one of whom was a
dirty cop turned assassin and the other a modern Mengele, I’ll take shitty dead-beat number one,
thanks.”

“It wasn’t Ivo either,” he told her. At her inquiring look, he explained, “After I spoke to Queen, I
gave Alfred his name as well. According to everything he could find on Ivo, he was nowhere near
Nevada during that time period either. There are no credit card records or plane tickets issued in his
name anywhere in the States. He could have possibly driven to Las Vegas but he was also married to
a woman named Jessica and they had a son. Jessica suffered from a form of progressive body
dementia similar to Huntington’s called MacGregor's Syndrome and his research was dedicated to
finding a cure both for her and their son in case he developed the condition later. He was apparently
just as obsessed with his research as Ducard was with catching Jeremiah Hassan and taking down
the GIA.” He took her hand again, leaning forward so his head was close enough that she could feel
his breath, “Neither of those men were your father.”

“So either Savant lied to Slade or my sperm donor lied to my mom and made up a name that happens
to be the same as your old Interpol buddy. Or both,” she added. “Still a weird coincidence.”

“I’m guessing both,” he told her. “Why, I have no idea, but I doubt it’s a coincidence. Savant prides
himself on accuracy so if he sold that lie to Slade then there’s a reason for it.” He squeezed her hand
again then pulled her close, tucking her under his arm, “Now tell me about that night.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“I know, but I’m here; it’ll be okay.”

She felt the cold invade her bones again as her pulse fluttered in her neck, then shivered as it crawled
inside her chest, its icy tendrils wrapping around her heart. Bruce drew the covers over them and
pulled her closer until her ear was pressed against his bare chest. She could hear the steady
whooshing sound of his heart as it pumped warm blood throughout his body and tried to absorb his
heat but the cold was coming from her core, radiating outwards. She took a breath, then another,
keeping time with the steady tattoo of his heartbeat.

It was like the ticking of a clock.

Whump-bump.

One-two.

Whump-bump.

Three-four.

She counted off the beats like the ticks of a second hand and it helped calm her. It reminded her that
time was still crawling forward one beat at a time.

One second, one beat.

One minute, sixty beats.

One hour, three thousand, six hundred beats.

Eighty-six thousand, four hundred beats meant life was passing by one day at a time.

She took a deep breath.
“It was my birthday; midnight, and an ARGUS air strike was coming at any minute. They were going to kill everyone if I didn’t take out both the device and Slade before they got there.”

“Who?” She demanded, “Ghosts, savants, demons; what are you talking about!? Who is this ‘devil’?”

“Oh, I don’t want to spoil the surprise.” He glanced up at the moon which was barely visible through the haze of clouds then smiled down at her, “Midnight, love; Happy Birthday! Tell you what; because you’ve been such a good girl, I’m going to get you something extra special just to celebrate.”

She shook her head at him, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“On our way to meet our friend I think we’re going to have to stop by the jewelers and get you a ring then find you another pretty white dress to wear. I do believe I’ve suddenly grown weary of this bachelor’s life,” he shouted, crowing with laughter as he spun around, the storm now whipping around them in a fury. “It’s the married life for me, Missus; just you wait! Hah!”

There was an explosion followed by a terrible cracking sound as lightning struck the electrical pole nearest them. The falling pole, now engulfed in flames despite the rain, made the earth tremble under their feet as it hit the ground splattering mud in every direction. She could feel it hit her cheeks and hair as the sky lit up like the Fourth of July. Lightning stuck all around them and arched across the dark roiling clouds in patterns that made no sense and her vision, what there was off it, turned blue and spotty due to the constant flash. It was like she was trapped in a room with a thousand cameras pointed at her and all going off at once.

At the time she didn’t care; all she was concentrating on was him, Slade, and getting him away from Oliver and the rest of them. She was going to kill him, kill both of them, but that was okay as long as her team lived.

Lance was in position. She made sure Slade’s back was to the truck holding the device as she spoke. He nodded at her as if to signal he had a truck and could get them out, but she needed to get Slade as far away from Oliver as she could. Time was not on her side either. Between the incoming air strike and Oliver, who was pawing the ground to pull himself towards them thereby causing himself to bleed out quicker, she had maybe less than five minutes, if that, to push the detonator so Lance could collect her team and haul ass away from the blast zone. Even then she had no way of knowing if her team would survive, but a slim chance was better than none at all.

In her darkest moments she sometimes thought that maybe Oliver should have taken the Mirakuru himself. It wasn’t a serious thought, just a demon whispering in her ear, the kind that came when desperation was breathing down their necks and the devil was walking across her grave.

‘If he had the serum he would heal, he would live,’ it said as it slithered through her mind. The voice whispered, ‘If he took the Mirakuru, he could take down Slade.’

But she didn’t want that, not really. She knew with absolute certainty that, had she the Mirakuru in her hands at that moment, even if Oliver was on his last breath, she wouldn’t use it. She wouldn’t turn him into the very monster he hated even if it meant saving his life.

After all, that’s the kind of thinking that created the monster to begin with, and Slade was a monster; Lance was right about that. He looked like a man, spoke like a man, even sounded capable of reason
and logic from time to time, but there was a demon slithering inside of his skull; one far more powerful than her own niggling voices of fear and desperation.

The scary thing was that even though he was a monster, he was also a man. There was a human heart beating in his chest, one still capable, like Roy, of reason, but he chose to ignore that part of himself. He was the thing that haunted their nightmares by choice; his choice.

As the adrenaline rushed through her bloodstream and grim purpose began to ice her veins, time slowed. Outside of her mind she could still hear the shrill howl of the wind, feel the sting of the rain as it stuck and sliced her skin. The hot rain was soon joined by hail as tornadoes began to form around them. The chunks of ice bounced like golf balls, then softballs in every direction, steaming and fogging the ground as hot met cold.

The world is ending, she thought. The world is ending on my birthday and I’m going to miss it.

And I didn’t even get a piece of cake.

In the back of her mind she could hear Oliver call out for her in keening desperation as rain mixed with the tears that were coursing freely down her cheeks. The sky was bleeding fire and ice.

Now that was something you don’t see every day. Hot meets cold, hot rain and fist sized hail; the ingredients for one hell of an apocalypse, she thought distractedly, her mind already beginning to separate from reality.

She was so tempted to look at him, to turn her head one last time and just tell him how much she loved him; had always loved him.

Will always love him.

But she didn’t. She couldn’t risk Slade’s temper. She needed to keep him focused on her, only on her.

Still, she wanted to say goodbye. She missed Bruce, as well. Even though he’d hurt her, she wished she could call him and tell him that their one weekend was the only memory she’d ever have of being touched.

Images flew through her mind; Bruce as he slept, the sound of masculine chuckles as she shivered under his fingers, the smell of aftershave on her pillow, the taste of desperate kisses…

“If you think I’m going to marry you then you really are nuts!” Felicity shouted.

She saw the look in his eye and knew her defiance was exciting him. Between the Mirakuru in his blood and the storm raging around them, Slade was nearly mad with lust. His enemies were either down or dead and he had his final revenge. Plus, he believed he had his Shado back through her, and he was going to take her as his prize even as he vowed to woo her. She could see it, practically smell it. He was exuding pheromones as his one remaining eye coasted down her body, lingering on her mouth, her chest, and the juncture of her thighs. She felt exposed and dirty; every salacious thought was telegraphed by the hunger she saw in his expression.

If she allowed him to take her right then and there, they’d already be rutting in the mud as the world came apart around them.

“Oh, you will,” he vowed, his mouth curving into a triumphant smile, “and we’ll live happily ever after; just you, me, and baby makes three! Or four, or even ten! Why stop with one when we could have an army of the wee bitty ankle biters! If you’re willing Missus, then we’ll have you in the
pudding club as often as you like! You’ll be mummy and I’ll play doting dad and we’ll rule the world alongside our little prince together!” His cackling laughter bounced oddly off the storm and was nearly drowned out by the sound of rending metal. “Lots of changes coming, love.” He was nearly whispering but even through the storm she heard him. It was like she could almost read his mind. He reached for her, his palm caressing her cheek gently. She stumbled nearly losing her courage, as well as her balance, as the wind and her own fear buffeted her about. She curled her fingers around the detonator tightly. ‘Not yet,’ she thought as he continued to put his hands on her, ‘Have to get away from the others so they aren’t within the blast radius.’ “You and I are going to take a bit of a ‘round the world honeymoon; now doesn’t that sound lovely?”

“I don’t think so,” she spat out, pretending to try to escape. She knew how much the thrill of the chase would excite him and she needed him to take her off.

It was a risk. He might decide to ‘punish’ her defiance right then and there so Oliver could watch but she doubted it. Slade was many things but even in the throes of madness, he wasn’t a rapist. He needed to believe he could seduce her first and, when he did, he wouldn’t want Oliver to see what was his. He believed she was Shado now and he wouldn’t want Oliver to claim any part of her even if it was just the sight of her naked body in another man’s arms.

“Sorry Missus,” he said as he easily caught her around the waist, “but I’m afraid that you’re coming with me, whether you like it or not,” he said before picking her up and throwing her over his shoulder.

She squirmed slightly, enough to both give him the token impression of resistance as she pulled the detonator and the LED charge from her pockets. She gasped as he slapped her bottom, causing him to chuckle.

“Oh, I see,” he murmured to her. “I think, Mrs. Wilson, that there’s a bit of a bad girl hiding under all that sweet innocence.” He soothed the smack with his hand as he rubbed it across her bottom then gave it a possessive squeeze, “Don’t worry, my love; I promise to be gentle the first time but, after we’ve gotten the preliminaries taken care of, we’ll give in to that hidden hellcat of yours. I have a feeling that I’m going to enjoy that fire for many years to come.”

She let him talk as he carried her, carefully placing the magnetic charge against his armor and activating it. Oliver was too far away for her to hear him now, the wind carrying away their words and his. It was just as well, she thought as she saw him shout her name, his hand reaching for her. She didn’t want him to have to hear what Slade was saying. She tightened her hand around the detonator, her fingers slipping against it, slick with rain and blood, then closed her eyes so she wouldn’t have to watch him suffer anymore.

The storm died down, the howling fading into silence and, as they rounded the front of the truck, the skin on her arms stopped stinging from the pounding rain. It merely gentled then stopped as if it had never been.

“We’ll have a boy to start, of course,” he told her, his voice clear in the silence that surrounded them. “Been a while since I had a little boy to bounce on my knee. I’ll be able to do better with this one than I did my eldest, Joey; be at home more, teach him what he needs to know, raise him to be a man. I’m thinking Grant. It’s a good name,” he said as he moved them over the uneven terrain, adjusting her slightly in his arms. “Dignified, classy; like you. And if we have a girl next; Rosie, after me mum. Beyond that though, any name’s fine long as it’s not Oliver!” He laughed. “Although that would be a side-splitter, eh? We could invite him to be godfather since he was the one to introduce us in a way.” He chuckled as they approached the passenger side of the truck, his hand squeezing her thigh with easy familiarity. She’d stopped squirming a while back in order to allow him to get
distracted by his own mad ramblings. “What do you think, love? Think Oliver’s a good name?”

“Not really,” she told him, her head swimming dizzily as she began to go numb with shock. “I like Rose though.”

She felt herself shut down then. It was over, done, now she was just a ghost in a shell.

“Good girl!” He praised her in surprise as he caressed her curves again, this time with a small lingering rub. “I knew you were just playing me back there. I’m glad to see you’ve gotten over your little temper tantrum.” He opened the door and sat her on the seat. She kept her arms around his neck though, still holding the detonator so he couldn’t see it. “What’s wrong, love?” He smiled, his head tilting toward hers as he stepped closer, “Still afraid of the storm? It’s all done now; just a wee bit of a squall is all. Come and gone like a stranger in the night.”

Like a stranger in the night. That’s what she was; a stranger in the night. Something there for a moment, then gone and forgotten.

She felt…detached. More than numb. It was like she was seeing herself from the outside. She felt like she was floating away now and nothing was real.

Would they even remember her? Would anyone? She had done almost nothing with her life so far. She was twenty-three years old and she had nothing, was nothing; she didn’t even have a cat. Yes, she saved lives but no one would ever know that. Yes, she was smart and well-educated, but she’d done nothing with it; nothing tangible anyway. As far as the world outside of Team Arrow was concerned, she was a one-hit wonder who wound up becoming another blonde secretary joke around the water cooler.

She was…a ghost.

She was like the storm, in a way. Here, then gone; a stranger in the night, just like Slade said. There would be a brief announcement, maybe a couple of mass signed condolence cards on QC stationary, a notation in the MIT Alumni newsletter, then a new person would be sitting at her desk and it’d be business as usual.

Dust to dust. From dust she came and to dust she will return.

Her family would miss her, of course. She felt some measure of guilt then. Her family had always loved her, supported her, and yet she was the one who pulled away from them after all that. First it was the guilt of carrying her mother’s secret, then the pain of a failed love affair but, in the end, she’s the one who abandoned them, not the other way around.

They’d miss her, mourn her…or would they? ARGUS would see to it that this mission stayed off the books and there wouldn’t be a body left to bury. She was sitting on three bombs; one on Slade, one on the gas tank and, of course, the Omega Device which would wipe her from existence entirely according to the intel she’d read on the way there.

Would ARGUS even let them tell her family she was dead? Would Oliver call them to--

Stupid question, she chastised herself; he didn’t even know she had a family. In fact, she’d hidden her tracks so well, not even Bruce would ever know what happened to her--if he even came looking, which was doubtful.

Still, she would have at least liked to leave a letter for Bruce, just for her own peace of mind, but she doubted he’d care beyond the fact that she was Lucius’s daughter and her death a mystery to be solved; she really wouldn’t mean much to him as a person. Her father might ask him to look into it
but she wondered if he would even bother. He might not even consider her disappearance worth looking into since it happened outside of Gotham. He’d never so much as spoken to her after that weekend and, chances are, he hadn’t even thought about her in years; she was just one woman among dozens who were far more memorable than her. She needed that closure though, and now she’d never have it.

Sometimes she wondered if he even remembered her.

That hurt to think about though. She realized that people had casual sex all the time, that lots of people could screw without so much as exchanging names, but what had been just another warm body to him had meant something to her.

Turns out, it was all she’d ever have.

She let that sink in then felt sick to her stomach. For just today, for just those last few minutes of life, she was going to pretend that, if he did find out she’d died, he’d mourn her at least a little. Not a lot; she didn’t need ashes and hair shirts. She understood that the people she aligned herself with couldn’t afford to be bogged down by feelings of remorse or loss. Besides, even if Bruce forgot about her, her team would remember. She’d be mourned for a day or so, glasses would be lifted in her name, and then she’d be cast from their minds only to come up once in a while in casual remembrance like Tommy still was occasionally. Maybe not even that, she realized with a heavy heart. Tommy had been a tragic victim but she was a willing sacrifice, just another fallen soldier. Dig, Sara, and Roy would drink to her memory at least, but while Oliver mourned Tommy, she’d be lucky if he even forgave her.

But she couldn’t think like that, she couldn’t. She needed to conserve her strength, she needed to believe that pressing that detonator meant something; that her life had meant something to someone.

She couldn’t die knowing she was already a ghost. Even if he didn’t really remember her, she probably should have written Bruce and his team letters like she did for the rest of her family, but she didn’t know what she would’ve said even if she had. But, on the off-chance he did come looking for her…

On second thought, if Bruce came looking for answers then all the letters in the world wouldn’t stop him and, besides; what would she have said?

‘Hi Bruce, it's Felicity,

Don’t know if you remember me but we had sex once and now I’m dead. Please don’t come to Starling to look for answers because you won’t find any.

Wishing you well from the other side,

XOXO ---Felicity’?

Right.

Even the letters to her family that she’d left with Lance had been skimpy on the details. All they really said was ‘I love you’ along with her will, a few insurance policies, and copies of some patents that she’d filed in connection with the start-up she was planning before leaving Gotham, but nothing about who she was or the life she’d led since then. She couldn’t tell her family how she died or what she’d been doing in Starling without exposing Oliver. Actually, she didn’t even leave a letter for Oliver either. She thought about it, she left one for everyone else on the team, but even if she had written him a letter, chances are he’d never read it anyway. He’d either rip it up angrily or use it as
something to torture himself with.

Besides, truth be told, they weren’t really anything to each other, were they? He told her he loved her but that was just a trap for Slade; her trap. She’s the one who wrote the script even if he adlibbed the lines. In fact, some days she wasn’t even sure if they were friends. She knew he cared about her but she wasn’t sure what that meant and now she never would.

Maybe it was selfish; no, it was selfish, but she was dying and the dying had a right to be selfish, didn’t they? The truth was she wanted to be mourned, she wanted to be remembered. Was it so wrong to want to be missed by the only two men she’d ever loved even if they never loved her back?

She could easily count how many times she’d been kissed. She knew exactly how many times she’d been made love to. She remembered the exact day they made love for the first time, the exact hour, and knew to the minute how much time she spent in Bruce’s arms: Sixty-seven hours, four minutes, one hundred fifty-four kisses, and ten times. For him it was probably a dim recollection, if that, but for her it was everything.

She couldn’t even claim that much with Oliver. She’d never even kissed him, could count how many times he’d touched her shoulder or face, and every time she’d touch him in return he’d stiffen up and fidget awkwardly until she stepped away, but those brief platonic touches were all she’d ever have of him.

That’s all she’d ever have…

Slade was right, she realized. It was an empty existence. Her life was empty and, in the end, it was just the two of them.

“What’s wrong, love?” Slade asked, his hand reaching up to touch her cheek. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost. The storm didn’t frighten you that much, did it?”

“No.” She closed her eyes, feeling her heart shatter.

This is it, she thought. She was dying. This was her last few moments and then she’d no longer be a human being anymore. She wouldn’t even be a body anymore.

She hoped her father wouldn’t do like Oliver and Sara’s parents had done and bury an empty box. It seemed like such a waste, such an empty gesture. She understood that funerals were for the living and not the dead, but still, she didn’t want them to have to leave flowers on something that had no real connection to her. It felt like a lie and she was tired of all the lies that surrounded her; she didn’t want to be a liar in death as well.

It wasn’t fair, none of this was fair. She wasn’t afraid to die, not really, but she didn’t want to die with unfinished business. There was too much unfinished, too much left unsaid. This…this half-life she was leaving behind just wasn’t enough; not for her.

It just wasn’t fair, she thought. She was dying on her birthday; how fucking unfair was that? She was going to die.

Alone.

She was alone. Just her and the monster under the bed; the demon who she’d be joined with for the rest of eternity.

“You’re trembling,” he said with a note of concern. “Come now, darling; I know you’re made of sterner stuff than this. Where did my little hellcat go to, hmm? Besides, I’m here with you now,
remember? You’re perfectly safe as long as you’re in my arms.”

Perfectly safe in the arms of the thing that haunted her nightmares.

Perfectly safe in the arms of death incarnate who happened to have a bomb strapped to his back while faced with the choice to either kill herself and him, or don’t and let her team die while she spent the rest of her life as his personal broodmare/concubine.

She shut her eyes even tighter and wished it was someone, anyone else standing in front of her instead of Slade.

She thought about Bruce; thick dark hair, the spicy scent of his cologne, kisses that could go from hard and bruising to soft and tender. She thought of large calloused hands and hot breath as he kissed his way down her neck. Even if he hurt her in the end, he was still her first love, still the hero who held the monsters at bay.

She should have called him, she thought. She should have called, but it never even crossed her mind. She just… she just acted. She didn’t even think about calling. He might not have been able to make it, he might not have even remembered her, but she could have at least heard his voice one last time before she died. Maybe he could have fixed it? Maybe… The panic built up then and she willed it back down.

She couldn’t go there, she couldn’t, so she thought of Oliver instead; his stubborn chin and eyes so filled with pain it broke her heart every time. She thought of his smell; leather, beeswax, clean sweat, and the white petroleum jelly he used to protect and maintain his bow, the bow she designed for him. His tentative touches, the calluses on his fingers, the rasp of his beard under her fingertips. Bruce was always her protector but Oliver always made her feel strong. He made her feel like she was capable of doing anything and, right now, she was so scared…

More than anything though, she wanted them to be there with her. She needed them to lend her their strength to do what needed to be done and, God help her, she wanted… she wanted to go home but home was with them and there was no going back; not anymore.

Home was gone, she thought dizzily. She was gone; alone, forgotten.

Everything was gone.

Like a stranger in the night…

No, no Slade was gone, she decided then. As long as she kept her eyes closed, he was gone. She could pretend for just a little while, for just a few seconds more…

*There was a sharp buzzing sound as pain and pressure built up in the back of her skull.* She grew faint, her head tipping forward as her mind ripped apart.

“What’s wrong?” Her demon asked in alarm as bright lights began to flash behind her eyelids.

“My head…” she slurred dizzily, her stomach churning. “It hurts. Make it stop…”

“What hurts?” Bruce asked in alarm as he tipped her chin up to look at her. “Did you hit your head?” He asked, his fingers running through her hair.

Even with her eyes closed she could see them. There they were; Oliver and Bruce. How, she didn’t know, but she could see them; not just imagine them, literally *see* them. “You’re here…” she whispered in amazement, her arms tightening around Bruce’s neck as her head swam dizzily,
“You’re really here; you came for me after all.”

“Of course I did, love,” he said, the corners of his eyes crinkling in amusement as he looked down at her. “Where else would I be?”

Her soul was wandering, she thought as she felt hot tears gather and fall. She was dead and this was the afterlife, or would be soon enough. Some small part of her knew her mind was splintering, knew she was giving into the madness that surrounded her, but she was beyond caring. Her death was imminent, just a simple press of a button and then done. She could feel the hard plastic of the detonator in her hand. She’d been through hell and back, her clothes soaked in the blood of the lives she’d taken; if she sought out this one moment of comfort before death claimed her, so be it.

The pain faded as the lights dimmed and the pressure began to stabilize. She still felt nauseated but it was more bearable now.

“Are you real or am I just crazy?” She asked in a small voice she hardly recognized.

“Do I feel real?” He asked, brushing his lips against her forehead.

“But…” she shook her head, “but you can’t be…you can’t be real.”

“Of course I’m real,” Bruce said in confusion. “What makes you think I’m not real?”

“I don’t…” The pressure began to build again and she tipped forward slightly under the weight of it, “I’m…I can’t remember…”

She tried to remember why he couldn’t be there but, when she tried, pain would slice through her and her brain felt like it was on fire.

“Are you alright, love?” He asked again, his voice heavy with concern.

“I just…” She wanted something but she couldn’t remember what. “I want…”

His hands brushed over her hair, “What do you want?”

Kiss and make it better, she thought dizzily.

“I want you to kiss me. Just—just please?” She pleaded.

“I’d be happy to, but why?” She could hear Slade’s voice but it wasn’t his breath on her lips, it wasn’t his hands spanning her ribcage, or his thumbs skimming the bottom of her breasts. No, it was them, she decided; both of them, Bruce and Oliver. It was Oliver’s voice, then Bruce’s, that asked, “Why now, love?”

“Baby,” she told him, willing him into existence. It was a lie but that was okay; she could be happy with a lie as long as it gave her some small bit of comfort before she died. As soon as she began to accept that, the pain began to ease somewhat.

“You want a baby? I’ll give you all the babies you desire,” he murmured, his lips skimming hers lightly.

“Call me ‘Baby’ like you used to,” she told him as Bruce pulled back slightly.

And it was Bruce, she decided. Bruce was here, Bruce was holding her.
Everything was going to be okay now.
She felt the pressure in her skull lessen even further and breathed a sigh of relief.

“You want me to call you Baby?” He asked her.

She nodded, “I know…I know I used to say I hated it when everyone called me by my nickname, but I—I’ve missed the way you used to say it. You called me ‘Baby’ and…” she swallowed, “hearing you say that, call me that, it made me feel like…like I wasn’t alone anymore and that maybe you could love me someday like I loved you.”

“But I do love you, Baby,” Bruce told her. “My beautiful, beautiful girl…” he whispered against her lips then kissed her softly, “I’ve missed you so much.”

“Really?” She asked a little desperately. “You’re not just saying that, right? You really missed me?”

“Of course I did,” she felt his rough fingers collect the tears from her cheeks. “You’re all I’ve thought about; just you.”

Her head felt so heavy, “You didn’t forget about me?”

“No,” he said with a soft smile, his thumb tracing her cheekbone the way he used to, “I could never forget you.”

“I missed you so much. I’ve missed you for so long,” she said, her voice breaking as the tears began running down her cheeks in earnest; the stress and pain of the situation finally releasing the floodgates. Oliver, she thought, as his face replaced Bruce’s in her mind’s eye. How he was there or where Bruce had gone she didn’t know, but he was still there nonetheless. Something inside of her said not to question it; that it was just better to accept it and move on, “I…I thought I was going to die alone. Don’t leave me; I don’t want to be alone. I was so scared, I…I tried to be strong but…”

“I won’t ever leave you alone again,” Oliver said with Slade’s voice as he cupped her cheek. “Never again, I swear.”

“Are you mad at me?” She sniffled, the pain in her head making it hard to think clearly.

“Why would I be mad at you, love?” Oliver asked, brushing his hands over her hair gently.

“Be-because I—“ she sobbed, “Because I came here to find you.”

“No,” he shushed her. “I’m proud of you, darling; so proud of you!” He placed a gentle kiss on her temple, “My clever, clever girl…”

“I was—I was scared you’d die and…” she broke down, “I couldn’t…”

“I’m fine!” He assured her, “We’re both fine and we’re together.”

“Really?” She whimpered.

“Really, love; what’s gotten into you? This isn’t like you at all! You’re being quite a silly little thing, you know that, don’t you?” Bruce chuckled as Oliver faded away.

“It’s not silly!” She said angrily, “It’s not! I’m not just some—-”
“Some what?” Bruce asked her, taken aback by her angry tone.

“I’m not a child! I’m not some silly little girl! You might have thought I was just—that it was nothing, but it wasn’t! It meant something to me; that night meant something! I loved you and it wasn’t just—!” She took a shuddering breath, her thoughts scattershot, and tried to make sense of what it was she was feeling. “I really loved you. It wasn’t just a crush or some kind of fling on my part. I w-was so angry with you when you left me like that! I was lying in bed and you just left me! You just left like you didn’t even care what h-happened to me! You told me…you t-told me…”

“Shh!” Bruce soothed, his lips touching the corners of her mouth then resting on her forehead. “Is that what all this is about? I’m sorry, Baby; I should have taken you with me. I wanted to, but—” She heard him swallow, “I thought it was too dangerous. I thought you’d be safer where you were until I settled this mess with—”

“I wanted to stay with you!” She sobbed. “You left me and I wanted to stay with you! I didn’t care about how dangerous it was as long as I was with you! I wanted to be with you forever and you just left me like you didn’t care! Like I was nothing to you! Like what we shared didn’t mean anything!”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Bruce apologized, sounding a bit shaken up himself. “I-I didn’t know…if I had known how much I was hurting you by leaving you there--! Love, I wouldn’t have left you! I would have woken you up and taken you with me! I thought about it, I did! I swear…”

“Why did you do it?” She asked him. “Why did you just walk away like that? How could you…?” Bruce faded and then it was Oliver standing before her again, his eyes heavy with guilt and remorse. She didn’t even question it because when she did the pain would make her feel like her skull was on fire and she wanted it to be Oliver, she did. “How could you just leave without even saying goodbye or leaving me a letter; something? Did you ever care about me at all; even just a little bit? You could have died and I never would have even known what happened to you.”

“Of course I did; I do! But I couldn’t…” Oliver said in a pained voice. “I didn’t want you to get hurt. Do you really love me?” He asked quietly. “I always hoped you would someday but…”

“Oh course I love you,” she said tearfully. “I always have; since day one I’ve loved you,” she said gulping in air as her breathing became ragged, “That day, the day you said you loved me; I wanted you to kiss me so much. Even if it wasn’t real. I used to…I used to dream about it only you meant it and then you kissed me.”

“I dreamt of you, too,” Oliver breathed. “I imagined you in my arms, making love to you, how sweet you’d taste…”

“If that’s true then why were you always pushing me aside?” She asked, all the anger and resentment she’d felt for so long bubbling forth, “I was right there this whole time; we could have been together this whole time, but just when I thought you were finally going to choose to be with me…” She swallowed, “Why couldn’t you have just chosen me? What did all those other women have that I didn’t? Why wasn’t I ever good enough?”

“Who are you talking about?” Oliver asked her in confusion. “There’s been no one else but you,” he promised her.

“That’s not true,” she told him.

“Felicity, there’s been no one else but you,” Oliver told her as he cupped her cheek. “I love only you.”
“But then why did you let Isabel…?”

“Isabel…” he spat, “What about her?”

“Nothing,” she said wearily. “I just…I’m just so tired…tired of feeling like I’ll never be good enough and my head hurts…”

“You are more than good enough, I have you now and you’re all I’ll ever need from here on out,” he soothed. “As for that one; she’ll get hers soon enough, I promise you. She’ll pay for every last one of her sins against you, my love; of that you can be sure.”

She licked her lips tasting the salt of her own tears and sniffled. She was in a floaty place now, she felt detached from her body. It was all a dream, just a very strange dream.

Her fingers tightened again on the detonator, the joints going stiff from all the pressure she was exerting on them. That was real at least. A voice inside her spoke, reminding her that it was almost time to press the button and then it would all be done. That this was just a beautiful dream, one last gift in order to give her the strength she needed before death came to claim its due.

“I’m so tired and my head hurts,” she said wearily. “I just want to sleep now.”

“We’ll be off soon and then you can rest, I promise,” Bruce wandered back as though summoned, his deep blue eyes searching hers as his presence gave her comfort.

He always did make her feel safe, she thought as she reached up with a trembling hand, running her fingers gently over the soft lines at the corners of his eyes, “I almost forgot how handsome you were,” she said brokenly. “I know it might not seem like it, but I’m glad you’re here. I didn’t…I didn’t want to die without seeing you one more time,” she told him, beginning to hyperventilate. “I’m sorry; I’m so sorry.” She buried her head in his neck and cried.

“Breathe, Baby; just breathe,” Bruce soothed as he made a comforting noise.

“Did you forget about me?” She asked in a small voice, the pressure and fuzziness in her mind making it hard to think about anything but the detonator in her hand. “I know you said you didn’t but everyone forgets. I don’t know why but they just forget about me,” she said sadly. “Could you…just one more time, could you just pretend and say you didn’t forget? Just for a little while.”

“I don’t have to pretend.” He pulled her head away from his shoulder so he could look at her, his fingers stroking over her cheekbones. “No, I never forgot about you, love! I drew your picture a thousand times just from memory alone. I filled entire books with your image, countless pages just of you. I remembered every single second that you were in my arms and it haunted my every waking moment.”

“I-I know you’re not real but I just didn’t want to go without saying goodbye,” she said in a voice so faint it was almost a whisper.

“You don’t have to,” he reminded her. “I’m real, see?” He placed her hand on his cheek, “I’m here and I’ll never leave you again,” he swore, his thumbs still catching her tears. “Never again! Never ever, I swear!”

“It’s almost time, isn’t it?” She asked him.

“Time for what?” Oliver asked her.
“Time to go,” her words were slurring and it was getting harder and harder to concentrate. She knew she couldn’t hang on for much longer; it was now or never.

“Yes,” he nodded, the rasp of his beard scraping her fingers.

“I’m scared,” she broke down in sobs. “I tried to be brave but I’m scared; I don’t want to leave.”

“But we’re going to a better place; much, much better than this one, I swear,” Oliver said, his voice muffled by her wet hair as he kissed her, his large hands running up and down her spine in comforting circles. “It’s going to be a paradise filled with everything you could ever want or hope for. All good things await you, my love, I promise.”

“I don’t know if I believe that though,” she admitted. “I’ve never really had all that much faith in stuff like that.”

“Then I’ll just have to believe enough for both of us then, won’t I?” He chuckled.

“Could you just…”

“What? What do you need, love?”

“I know…I know it’s usually me who says it, but could you just tell me everything is going to be alright?” She whispered. “I just—I need you to say the words.”

“Of course everything is going to be alright,” he told her, his lips resting against her forehead. “My arms are holding you and I’ll always keep you safe. I’m here and not even death will keep me from you, I swear. And if any man ever tries to take you away from me again, if anyone ever dares to even attempt to keep us apart, I’ll kill him. I’ll tear his head from his shoulders with my bare hands and place it at your feet as an offering, even if I have to escape from hell to do it.” She felt him lift his head then brush his lips over her closed eyelids before pressing them gently to her lips and causing her to whimper, “We’ll spend the rest of our lives together, you and I. More than that even; we’ll be together for the rest of eternity. We’ll live forever; centuries, millennia. I’ll love you for a thousand years, then I’ll love you for ten thousand more,” he swore. “You belong to me and I keep what’s mine.”

“Kiss me,” she begged him. “I want you to kiss me one last time, even if you don’t mean it, I don’t care; I can pretend it’s real, just please.”

“I meant it,” Oliver told her. “Every word. I will love you for a thousand lifetimes and nothing, not even the Devil himself, will ever keep me from you again.”

His mouth fell on hers and she opened beneath him, the fingers of her hand not holding the detonator tangling in his short shorn hair as his tongue tasted her.

“Don’t forget me,” she whispered.

“I won’t,” he promised. “I will never forget you,” Bruce murmured against her mouth. “I could never forget you, Baby. You will always be mine,” he swore as he kissed her one last time.

Bruce’s kiss.

Oliver’s lips.
They broke apart and Oliver told her, “We’re going to be so happy together, my love; I promise.”

“I love you, too,” she sobbed. “You were always my hero; you will always be my hero. I will always love you,” she whispered then pressed the detonator as she offered him one last kiss goodbye…

…but nothing happened.

She pressed it again.

The pressure in her head lifted and her mind cleared, the pain dissipating as abruptly as the storm had just moments ago.

Slowly she opened her eyes, her lips leaving Slade’s.

She pulled back, bringing the detonator towards her, no longer caring if he saw, and stared at it. She pressed it again, heard the click, and realized it was broken.

Had to be.

She slowly lifted her eyes. Slade was so silent and still, his lips still frozen in a kiss as his hands remained hanging in midair as if framing her face. She scrambled backwards across the bench seat of the truck in disgust and self-recrimination, half expecting him to grab her, but he never moved. He never even breathed.

She fumbled for the door latch then jumped out of the vehicle and looked around her.

It was a world gone mad.

Everything, the entire world around her, had gone silent and nothing moved.

Literally.

“What’s happening to me…?” She whispered brokenly.

She looked around, not even daring to breathe. There was a glow from the other side of the truck, one she hadn’t noticed before, and it lit up the night sky making the suspended drops of rain that hung in midair reflect it back like thousands of tiny prisms.

For a second, she forgot the horror, the blood, and the fear, and just lost herself in the almost magical sight before her.

“Am I dead?” She rasped. “Is this…I’m dead; I died?” Her voice seemed to echo oddly around her and she heard an answering rumble that could have either been a yes or a no.

She reached out with trembling fingers and touched one of the perfect spheres of water, then, as if breaking the spell, the drop fell to the earth but the rest remained still and motionless. She swept her hand through the air and the raindrops fell all at once like she was cutting a path through them but none took their place. It was as if they were held above her by some invisible canopy.

She felt her knees weaken and wobble. She grabbed the side of the truck, leaning heavily against it, trying not to pass out. Her breath came in harsh pants and it felt as though there wasn’t enough oxygen left. Her vision began to tunnel as she turned slowly towards Slade, peering at him through the open door.

“Slade?” She whimpered. As terrified as she was of him, she was even more scared of whatever was
happening to them. “Slade?” She asked again, this time the desperation in her voice all too obvious.

He was frozen, just like the rain, his eyes still shut as they reached for her face that was no longer there.

“Wake up!” She ordered shakily. “Slade, wake up! I can’t…I can’t…” she shook her head, “I think that maybe…I think we’re dead or maybe I’m just crazy.” She wiped the hot tears off her cheeks and will him to move but he never did. Felicity swallowed the bile in her throat and stumbled around the front of the truck until she was standing behind him. She immediately saw where the glow was coming from. A fireball hung suspended under the gas tank. It wasn’t big, just enough to cast light, but it didn’t move, didn’t grow; it hung there as if frozen like everything else.

“Slade, I need you to wake up!” She reached for the LED charge on Slade’s back and hissed in pain as the heat stung her fingertips. She watched in horror as it slowly cracked and flames began to form in slow motion around it. Slade’s body began to cast forward in small increments and a dull roar filled the air as the fireball near the tank began to grow almost imperceptibly in size.

She ran then, her body recognizing the building danger even if her mind hadn’t yet caught up. The roaring began to build and crest. She felt the heat of the blast slowly warm the skin of her back as she headed towards where Lance was hiding.

She held her hands in front of her, swiping the suspended debris from her path so that it fell harmlessly to the ground. The thunderous rumble grew and intensified as the rain slowly began to move around her.

Time had stopped and yet she was still running out of it, she thought.

“It’s a dream,” she kept saying over and over again. “It’s just a dream…”

She rounded the rocks and saw him, suspended in midair. He’d been blown backwards, the debris and shrapnel from the still growing blast moving with infinite slowness all around him. She stumbled and froze; it was like something from a movie or a nightmare. He was floating.

Part of her was tempted to walk over and feel for strings but sanity hadn’t quite abandoned her altogether yet. Instead she ran for the truck he had parked behind some rocks and peered inside, breathing a sigh of relief when she saw the keys dangling from the ignition. She hopped in and started it up then backed it towards where Lance’s body still hung in midair.

Dream or not, they needed to move.

Her thinking went on automatic. She parked it then ran to the back of the truck to let down the tailgate and roll up the olive drab canvas flap before getting back into the truck and carefully using her mirrors to line up with the detective until he was swallowed into the back of the vehicle. She scrambled over the seats and touched him to drag him the rest of the way inside, jumping slightly when, at her touch, his body suddenly fell and he grunted without gaining consciousness. Luckily he was barely a couple of inches off the floorboards so he wasn’t hurt further but she still had to drag him by his shoulders, being careful not to dislodge a large shard of metal that had been driven through his flesh and sticking out near his collarbone.

The rolling sound of thunder was getting louder and she knew it was the explosion gaining in speed. She kicked it into high gear, scrambled into the driver’s seat, and drove as quickly as she could to the battleground where her fallen companion’s lay.

The first one she came to was Sara. She was a bloody mess, her blonde hair swimming in a pool of
blood and mud, and lying in a fetal position. She had a nasty slice across her abdomen and had been shot more than once. Felicity hesitated for a second, not knowing what would happen if she touched her but the sound of the explosion was slowly gaining in momentum. She grabbed her under her arms to drag her, the other woman’s chest immediately reacting to her touch by rising and falling with every breath.

Felicity nearly sobbed in relief at the sight, then struggled to lift her into the back of the Humvee. They were very nearly the same weight so it was a struggle but she dug in and maneuvered her over her shoulders in a fireman’s lift, then managed to get her inside.

“Sara…” Lance slurred as Felicity got in the truck to drag the other woman towards him until they were lying side by side.

“Detective?” She said shakily, hoping he was alert enough to help but he immediately fell unconscious again, the blood from his head wound caused by more shrapnel from the blast slowly trailing down the side of his face. “Lance? Wake up!” That’s when she felt a hint of panic again. She wanted Lance to wake back up, to tell her what to do, to help her, but she was alone. “Please?”

Lifting Sara into the back of the truck had nearly done her in despite the extra training she’d been doing with Diggle in the foundry; how was she going to lift three more men, all of whom outweighed her, by herself?

And she had no time.

As she looked out the open back of the large transport, the debris in the air began to shift, the blast from the explosion gaining in strength and sending a concussive wave outwards. Even if she wasn’t being affected by it, Lance’s injuries proved that they were. She needed to get them on the truck and away from the blast zone as quickly as possible.

With that in mind, she drove the truck further down, coming to Dig next.

She got out and stared down at him. He’d been shot multiple times, at least twice in the chest and a few times in one leg that looked broken as well. He was at least twice her weight; there was no way she could lift him by herself.

“I don’t…I don’t know what to do.” She felt the panic begin to bubble up into her throat again as she looked around for something, anything that could help her. There were a few buildings nearby so she ran over to check them, hoping to find a gurney, a relatively un-psychotic looking muscular guy, anything, but there was nothing and the sound was getting louder. Finally, and with a cry of relief, she saw a forklift in relatively good shape near the building where they had apparently been keeping the Omega Device.

It was slow going since she didn’t want to risk touching the debris hanging in midair so she had to duck and dodge the larger pieces and bat down the smaller ones until she got to the forklift. Luckily, once again, the keys were in the ignition. Apparently, given that they were in an abandoned military base full of armed super soldiers, no one was really concerned about thieves coming in to steal the equipment, so no one had secured the keys. While this was a glaring oversight on their part, she wasn’t complaining; operating it, however, was another problem entirely. She’d never actually driven a forklift before and it looked nothing like the controls of a car.

There were levers, and knobs, and switches on the small steering column, and to top things off, yep, it was a manual and not an automatic.

“Okay, okay…don’t panic.”
Too late, she thought fuzzily.

“First things first, I need to find something to help get some leverage,” she told herself as she tried to ignore the slow rumble of the explosion. “A board, something.”

She went to the front of the lift and found a relatively large piece of aluminum siding that hung just low enough to the ground that she could reach it with her fingertips. As soon as she touched it, it dropped and she dragged it down then laid it across the black plastic pallet that was still hung on the forks of the lift.

She got into the operator’s seat. “Okay, okay…” she muttered, turning the key.

Nothing.

“What?” She began to hyperventilate again. “No, no, no…” She turned the key again.

Still nothing.

“Turn on!” She ordered the machine, flipping the key repeatedly. She glanced back at the truck, wishing Lance or Sara—anyone would wake up. “Okay, just shut up! Shut up! Don’t panic, don’t panic…” She looked around the dash, finally seeing the ‘start button’. She pressed it then sobbed in relief as the loud motor roared to life. “Oh fuck me,” she said closing her eyes for a second. “Why the fuck do they have to put a start button everything? What’s the point of making you use a goddamn key if it has a fucking start button? Fucking assholes!”

She took in a big gulp of air as she looked down at the pedals. Remembering what Tim showed her when he (tried) teaching her how to drive a stick shift, she pressed her left foot on the clutch and her right on the gas then moved the lever on the steering wheel to ‘D-1’.

She gasped as the lift moved forward then steered towards Dig and the large military transport Lance had found. It was slow going because the steering wheel was stiff and hard to turn, so maneuvering it proved a bit tricky. Luckily, as the forklift encountered debris, it bounced harmlessly off the windshield of the machine to float off to the side but she still had to drive around all the obstacles in her path and, even though the forklift had headlights, she didn’t know how to turn them on. Frankly, she was scared to flip any of the switches on the dash given the way her luck had been running thus far. However, the part of her mind still able to comprehend what was happening to her with some measure of calm, noted that while she seemed to be able to unfreeze whatever she touched, things she animated didn’t seem to affect anything they touched.

When she got to Dig, she immediately encountered another problem which was how to actually move the forklift up and down.

“I went to MIT, I can figure this out,” she told herself as she stared down at the many levers on the center console of the cab and tried not to freak out as the debris field around her kept gradually speeding up, the noise of the explosion getting louder with each passing second.

She played with them a bit until she figured out how to make it go up and down. As soon as she figured that out, she got out of the forklift, dragged him onto the siding then onto the black pallet. She was sweating profusely and her fingers hurt, but adrenaline gave her a reserve of strength she wouldn’t have had otherwise. Carefully she lifted him into the air then maneuvered him into the back of the truck before parking the lift and dragging him near Lance and Sara.

As soon as he was settled, she got back on the machine to find the others, this time feeling a bit more confident in her forklift driving skills despite her ever-growing sense of dread. When she got to
Roy…

…Roy barely looked human anymore.

She didn’t want to touch him. She was convinced that the second she touched him he’d die if he wasn’t dead already. She stood helplessly over his broken and mangled body and all her hard-won self-confidence (despite the bizarre situation she found herself in) dissipated at once.

“I can’t touch him so what do I do? Think, think think…” A larger bit of debris flew past her face and she barely moved out of the way in time. “Shit!” She jumped back and made the mistake of looking at the truck that was now almost entirely consumed by the explosion, “Fuck, fuck, fuck! Ahh! Think!”

“Yes!” She saw a flat piece of wood that was stuck through the side of one of the metal buildings, retrieved it, then used it to leverage him onto the siding which she then dragged onto the pallet.

“Sorry,” she said with a wince. He was face down and crumpled into an uncomfortable position that probably wasn’t good for any spinal injuries he might have suffered, but it was the best she could do.

She used the pallet jack to gently lower him into the truck as best she could, then left him on the long piece of roof tin so she wouldn’t have to touch him. She carefully dragged him off the pallet by the corrugated metal, wincing as he fell the six inches or so onto the bed of the truck.

Without thinking she reached for him then recoiled in horror but not before her fingers lightly brushed his mangled cheek. “Roy!” She sobbed.

He took a shuddering breath and she could see the bones moving in his chest as he flopped over onto his back and straightened, “F’liss…ty…” he said with a wheezing breath.

“Sorry!” Felicity said again tearfully, even though he couldn’t hear her. His eyes closed and she frantically felt for his pulse, convinced she’d killed him with just a touch of her fingertips. “Please don’t be dead, please don’t be dead!”

The thready but still there pulse at his throat made her cry even harder, only this time in relief, but she needed to get Oliver and get them all medical attention as soon as possible.

Blood was everywhere now. As she moved to wipe the sweat and hair from her face she felt the stickiness of it as it dripped from her fingers but none of it was hers as far as she could tell. Her fingers felt pretty raw from dragging around the rough piece of siding though, so she couldn’t tell for sure. Didn’t matter, she didn’t have time to worry about it anyway.

She jumped down off the tailgate and wiped her hand on the front of her already blood-soaked shirt, then headed for Oliver last. He was located on a hill which was difficult to get to because the forklift operated with the wheels pushing from the rear instead of the front. A few times she nearly tipped it over but she finally managed it just as a second roar joined the first one, indicating the second charge had finally gone off.

He was lying with his face half submerged in a pool of mud and rainwater. The minute she reached under his armpits to drag him onto the pallet, he began to cough and hack up muddy water and blood without regaining consciousness, but the sound was enough to reassure her. She got him onto the forklift then carefully drove in reverse, rather than going forward down the steep incline, terrified the entire time that she’d drop him or he’d roll off. When she got back on flat ground, she breathed a quick sigh of relief then got him into the back of the truck.

Unfortunately it was getting pretty full back there and she didn’t want to put him too close to Roy, so
she half-rolled, half-maneuvered him until he was lying across Sara, Lance, and Dig. It wasn’t exactly ideal given their injuries but it was the best she could do. As soon as everyone was inside, she hopped out, put up the tailgate, then got into the driver’s seat and took off like a bat out of hell towards where Trevor and the others were waiting.

The further she got from the blast zone, the faster the debris began to move; still in slow motion but noticeably faster than it had been before. A lot faster.

She was about five miles down the road when new sound joined the explosion. She looked in her mirror to see the black on black silhouette of three Blackhawk helicopters in the far distance. They were going so slow she could see the blades as they spun around and around but the fact that they were there at all meant time was up. She put her foot down on the accelerator, no longer worried about being careful. All she was concerned about at that point was getting the hell out of dodge while keeping all four tires on the ground.

The windshield cracked as a chunk of what appeared to be a rail tie slammed into it causing a long piece of rebar to lodge halfway into the cab but she ignored it. She drove as fast as she could, not caring what or who she was rolling over as she made her way past their disabled tactical van and down the road at a less than safe speed. According to the gauges, the top speed of the truck was 70 mph, and she was gunning it well past the line. She was quite literally putting the pedal to the metal at that point.

Just when she was close enough to the old abandoned airfield to see it in the distance, time righted itself. From her rearview mirror she saw the massive fireball behind them fill the night sky with light and the entire truck shook from the concussive blast of the explosion. She barely kept the truck on the road but didn’t stop.

“F’lis’ty…?” Diggle moaned, looking up at her.

“Dig?” She said in relief, glancing behind her just as she passed through the gates. A Blackhawk was setting down just ahead of her and several ARGUS soldiers were hopping out and heading for Trevor and the others as a second and third chopper touched down on the other side. “Thank God; are you okay?”

“No,” he groaned, “How’s everybody else?” He asked, obviously in pain.

“I don’t know,” she said, rolling down her window as several armed men approached her warily, “Hey!” She yelled, “Help! I have wounded!”

“Stand down! They’re with us!” She heard Trevor call out as they helped him onto a backboard.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” One of the soldiers asked as he motioned for the medevac unit to head around to the back of the truck.

“I am now,” she sobbed in relief. “But my team–!”

“They’ve got them, ma’am,” he told her as the others opened the back and began shouting orders for more gurneys and backboards. “How are you? Do you require medical attention?”

“No, I’m good,” she said, laughing and crying at the same time as she wiped the tears from her eyes. “Seriously, I never thought I’d say this, but I am so glad to see ARGUS right now that if Amanda Waller were here, I’d be tempted to kiss her on the lips!”

The soldier opened her door for her, giving her a wry look, “Appreciate the sentiment, ma’am, but I don’t think the situation’s quite that dire yet.”
“You think I’m crazy now, don’t you?” She asked him fearfully, wrapping her arms around herself and shaking.

He had been staring at her in silence for almost a full minute after she finished telling him her story, his eyes hooded and troubled.

She pulled away, her first instinct to move and get away from his accusing gaze but he caught her around her shoulders and drew her towards him so that she couldn’t escape.

He kissed her hair then cleared his throat, “No,” he said, but there was a note of hesitation there. She tried to pull away from him again and his hands immediately caught her to tug her back a second time. “I don’t think you’re crazy,” he said firmly.

“Yes, you do,” she said, dropping her gaze in shame. “I told you I didn’t want to talk about it!”

“Don’t do this!” He said sternly, forcing her chin up to look at him but she shut her eyes. “Felicity, I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“But you don’t believe me.” It wasn’t a question.

“I think…” He seemed to struggle with his words for a minute, “I think you’re confused,” he said at last. “I think you were in an incredibly stressful situation, that you went through a lot out there, so your mind dealt with all of it the best it could, that’s all.”

“In other words, you think I went cuckoo for cocoa puffs,” she flushed. “Look, I don’t believe me either, okay? This is why I didn’t want to tell anybody what happened.” She tried to pull away again but he stopped her. “Just let me go!”

“Baby, I don’t think you’re crazy” he repeated, his hands wrapped around her upper arms, holding her in place. “Look at me and listen; just listen. When I had my own encounter with the Omega Device something similar happened to me. I don’t…” he took a deep breath, “I don’t know what happened, I can’t remember all of it because it messed with my head just like it did yours only, unlike you, I disappeared for almost five months.”

She blinked in surprise, her eyes finally finding his, “What? When?”

“A couple of years ago,” he told her. “Everyone thought I was dead; disintegrated along with the device.”

“So everybody thought you were dead for almost five months? Why didn’t anyone tell me?” She asked shakily.

“Tim thought I was alive and he convinced Dick and Alfred to tell people I was taking a few months off to devote myself to the Foundation’s overseas charities while he went looking for me. No one knew; not even your dad knew what happened, it wasn’t personal,” he assured her.

“He should have called me,” she said with a pained expression. “I could have helped!”

“No, you couldn’t,” he said, rubbing his hands down her arms soothingly. “I have very few memories of that time period but the ones I do have are…confusing. Even more confusing than yours, believe it or not.” He grimaced, “Apparently, ARGUS had me near the end though. From what I was able to find out from your team, Waller kept me prisoner and tried to torture me for information before having me retconned.”
Her eyebrows drew together, “My team?”

“That’s apparently what Trevor told Queen anyway, although Sergeant Diggle says he didn’t name names.”

“So Waller tortured you for five months?” She asked, flushing hotly.

“No, I don’t think so,” he said shaking his head. “I have other memories of that time but, like I said, they’re mostly disjointed images, half of which make no sense. Given the amount of drugs in my bloodstream, she couldn’t have had me more than a week or so.”

“But she did torture you.”

“Apparently,” he said wryly. “From what Trevor told Queen, when he found out what she was doing he ordered her to release me which was how they found me. I was pumped full of drugs and left in a pile of trash in an alley near Arkham.”

Felicity nodded once then reached for her phone.

“What are you doing?” He asked with a frown.

“Calling Trevor,” she growled as she scrolled through the names on her phone. “And then I’m going to kill Amanda Waller. And not ‘kill’ as in ‘hurt’, ‘kill’ as in ‘that bitch is going down hard’!”

“Stop,” he told her, snatching away the phone and putting it aside.

“They can’t be allowed to get away with this!” She insisted.

“What’s done is done and calling him won’t fix anything,” he said with grim finality. “I’ll have my sit down with Waller eventually, until then we need to deal with what’s in front of us.”

“Fine,” she bit out, “but don’t be surprised if you hear on the news tomorrow that ARGUS got hit by a super virus. And that Amanda Waller’s office was blown up by a drone that mysteriously went off course somehow.”

He sighed, “Felicity…”

“And another thing, Tim should have called me!” She said angrily. “I could have hacked into ARGUS! I would have found you a lot sooner!”

“Barbara already tried doing that—”

“I would have done it better!” She said tearing up. “Why didn’t he tell me?”

“The same reason you didn’t tell him that you were working with the Arrow, or about Slade, or why you didn’t call us for help six months ago,” he told her at last. She turned away from him in shame but he pulled her back. “I’m not blaming you,” he said quickly. “I’m not,” he assured her, his hand stroking down her back as he held her to his chest, “but given what you’ve told me and what I’ve learned over the last several days, I’m starting to think that your idea of forming a link between our separate missions is a good idea.” He kissed her hair and sighed, “It’s no secret that I’m a territorial son of a bitch, but one thing I do remember from those missing five months is this idea that I’ve never been alone in this mission.” He looked down at her, his eyes meeting hers. “From day one I had Alfred, then Dick, Barbara, and it grew from there. I always told myself it was *my* mission, but it wasn’t. It was never just mine. And you’re right, all of this, every bit of it, was ultimately preventable. If we had a way to communicate openly with each other, for different vigilante missions...
to come together and be able to reach out for help when we needed it, we could have avoided making so many mistakes.”

“It’s not all on you,” she said quietly, the heaviness in her chest making her voice husky. “I should have called you. I knew it then but…”

“No, don’t do that,” he told her, tilting her chin so she met his gaze. “Phones work both ways.”

“It’s not just you, though,” she said with tear-filled eyes. “When I left Gotham I stopped talking to Tim and Dick, I barely talked to Barbara…” she took a deep breath, “I even stayed away from home just to avoid you. I’m the worst kind of person, aren’t I?” She shut her eyes tight to avoid looking at him. “My family has always been so supportive and I just—I’m a terrible daughter and…” she swallowed as the tears began to roll down her cheeks. “It was selfish, and stupid…”

“No; stop it! If you were so hurt that you stayed away from Gotham for four years because of the way I treated you, then that’s on me,” he said firmly. “I’m the one who made the decision to—” he closed his eyes, “You think I didn’t know when you came home to visit three years ago? I did; it was all Lucius could talk about but I stayed away on purpose. I was avoiding you just as hard as you were avoiding me. I was terrified when I heard about that thing with the earthquake machine but when you came home, when I had the opportunity to come to you and ask you to forgive me, I ran away like a coward. I spent the whole time you were visiting with your family hiding from you and ducking Lucius’s calls because I was afraid of what I would say if I accidently ran into you at the office. He even left a message with Alfred inviting me over to dinner and I had him call and say I had another engagement because I—” He took a shaky breath, “I knew if I saw you again that I wouldn’t be able to let you go back to Starling; I couldn’t… I am a stupid, stupid man, Felicity. I’m intractable and I can be a horse’s ass, and I hurt you, so of course you left! You were…” he swallowed and his voice lowered, “You were an innocent, you’d never so much as kissed anyone before, and I treated you like a cheap one night stand. It was wrong and I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make that up to you, but what’s done is done; that’s all in the past. Right now we have to deal with what’s in front of us, take this; all of it, from the mistakes I made in regards to our relationship to the thing with Slade and the Omega Device, as a lesson learned, and make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“No! By creating a Justice League?” She asked with a weak smile.

“No; stop it! If you were so hurt that you stayed away from Gotham for four years because of the way I treated you, then that’s on me,” he told her, his eyes soft and loving as they looked into hers. “If I hadn’t been an idiot four years ago, we would already be married with a family of our own by now. If I had manned up and gone to you three years ago, I might have been able to convince you to forgive me and Slade would have never even known your name. I let you go so all of this, every bit of it, is on me.”

“That’s not true,” she said huskily, her voice strained from tears and stress.

“It is true,” he said, closing his eyes and leaning his forehead against hers before pulling away and smiling down at her. “Luckily, even though I’m an admitted idiot, I rarely make the same mistake twice. Believe me when I say that I’ve learned my lesson. As for this Justice League idea of yours, it’s not all that out of left field,” he shrugged. “The Justice Society was built on a similar premise. Granted, they were an actual team, and what we’re proposing is more of a network of individual missions who occasionally join forces, but if we had one central headquarters or communications network where the different missions could share ideas and information…” He looked at her again, “I don’t know what happened to me during those five months I was gone, just like I don’t know what it was that really happened to you that night, but you are still the smartest woman I know. You’re not crazy, you’re not a ‘Humpty Dumpty’,” he said in amusement, “and your ‘egg’ is not
cracked.”

She winced, “I said that out loud?”

He grinned affectionately, “The mind has a way of protecting itself, that’s all. No matter what happened or how all of it was possible, the fact is that you still got your team out of there; that’s all that matters.”

“And the night terrors?” She asked reluctantly.

“Misplaced guilt combined with your confusion over what happened,” he reasoned. “In my hallucinations it felt like I was traveling through time and space. I have strange memories of everything from running from a tribe of Neanderthals and painting on cave walls, to being a Puritan during the witch trials in Old Gotham and being cursed by a witch. I even have snippets of memories about being a pirate on the high seas, then a gunfighter in the Old West, then some kind of film noir-esque gumshoe during the thirties where I investigated my own father for the murder of my mother only to have a bunch of devil worshippers try to sacrifice me to a bat demon in the middle of a graveyard.”

“What?” She said incredulously then flushed as he arched an eyebrow at her in response. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” he said, stroking her cheek tenderly. “I never told anyone about my experiences with the device either because, like you, I knew it sounded insane and impossible, but it also felt very real. I don’t know what it did or where I went, but I do remember being confused and not being sure of who I was or why I was there.”

“Did you have the headache and stuff, too?” She asked.

“No,” he said after a moment’s pause. “I don’t know; like I said, I can’t remember. I do remember feeling very disoriented though and not even remembering my own name.”

“So why do you think you saw all of that?” She asked in confusion. “I mean, when I saw you and Oliver it was because I wanted you to be there with me because I didn’t want to die alone.” His eyes flashed with pain and she apologized again, “I’m sorry; I wasn’t trying to--”

“No,” he said quietly, his lips finding hers in a soft kiss, “No, don’t apologize. I wish I had been there and, although it terrifies me to know how close I came to losing you, part of me is glad that…” He closed his eyes for a second and took a deep centering breath, “I’m glad that, even if it was a hallucination, thinking of me gave you some comfort. That said, I never want you to ever have to experience anything like that ever again. When we die, I want to be in our bed when we’re both old and decrepit after making love one last time and falling asleep in each other’s arms.”

“Mutual death by old people sex?” She laughed, the mood lightening at his words.

“Why the hell not?” He said with a smirk. “If you have to die anyway, why not go out with a bang?” She winced, “Ooh, that was bad.”

“But true,” he said naughtily.

“Yeah, but think of how horrified our great-grandkids will be if they find us like that,” she snorted.

“They’ll get over it,” he chuckled, giving her a quick brush of his lips. “Besides, I’m sure our future progeny will be quite used to that sort of thing. I have a feeling that, no matter how old we get, or how long we’re together, I’m always going to want to jump your bones.”
“Jump my bones, huh?” She said mockingly.

“Jump. Your. Bones,” he confirmed, punctuating each word with a teasing kiss before pulling her across his lap and giving her a final kiss that stole the air from her lungs. He stroked his finger down her cheek, “I want to die in bed when I’m old and gray, Mrs. Wayne, because I don’t want to ever wake up to a world where you’re not there beside me.”

“Wow,” she said with a smile as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Now that was almost romantic. If I didn’t know any better I’d swear you were getting soft in your old age.”

“Trust me,” he drew his hand up her thigh then squeezed her bottom with a wink, “it’s not soft yet,” he quipped causing her to laugh. He gave her another quick kiss before speaking again, “As for what I think it was about; Damian. I think it was about Damian.”

“What do you mean?” She asked wriggling slightly so she could get more comfortable.

His gaze grew thoughtful as he stroked his fingers lightly down her back, “I was in a tailspin over having fatherhood thrust on me so unexpectedly and Damian was so violent and angry. In the months before my disappearance he killed…” he sighed, “several people; at least three, tried to kill several more. His last kill was actually Henri Ducard’s son, in fact.”

“What?” She said in surprise.

He nodded, “His son, Morgan, was a contract killer who went by the handle ‘NoBody’. He wanted me dead and tried to recruit Damian. He even taught him some assassination techniques which Damian then used on him in order to protect me. It was…difficult for me to accept that my son could be a murderer. I tried to love him as best I could; I even empathized with him in some ways.” He dropped his gaze, “I remember finding these pictures he had drawn of my Rogue’s Gallery that were something out of a serial killer’s playbook. He drew pictures of Two-Face being cut in half and Penguin being roasted on a spit.” He took a shuddering breath, “I admitted to him that…” he swallowed, “I’ve thought about it; killing them. More than once.”

Her brow furrowed, “Bruce…”

“It’s true,” he told her. “Not all of his darkness came from Talia; some of that, a good deal of it, came from me,” he admitted. “Sometimes when I’ve faced these…lunatics,” he spat out, “Monsters like Joker who are little more than killing machines, the urge to just end them is almost overwhelming. I’ve had those thoughts; especially when innocent lives are lost or like when he shot Barbara and left her paralyzed. I wanted to kill him, make him pay; I came close a few times, but I didn’t. I stopped myself before crossing a line that can’t be uncrossed. Maybe I shouldn’t have,” he grimaced. “I don’t know. Maybe if I had taken him out then lives could have been saved, but I made a commitment to live by the principles my father believed in. He was a doctor and believed that all life was sacred.”

He looked at her and smiled, “When I began this crusade, long before becoming the Bat, I may have started out on a path to vengeance but that all changed when I was in Nanda Parbat. I was standing in front of a man who had killed and raped with Ra’s telling me to end him, that he deserved to die, and I couldn’t do it. I wanted to, he deserved to die, but I couldn’t. I told Damian the same thing that went through my mind when I was faced with that choice, something my father once said, which was, ‘If you walk down a road of vengeance then you should dig two graves, one for your enemy and one for yourself,’ and that if he truly intended to build a better world that murder wasn’t the answer. You can’t build a better world by killing criminals—it bankrupts your soul *and* society’s by reinforcing the same cycle of violence, and that principles don’t allow for exceptions. If we fight then it has to be about seeking justice, not payback.”

“Do you believe that? That there are no exceptions?” She asked quietly.
He clenched his jaw and ran his hands up and down her arms comfortingly, “Baby, that wasn’t directed toward you.” When she didn’t answer he sighed, “You didn’t kill anyone out of anger or revenge; it was self-defense, there’s a difference.”

“Are you sure?” She asked quietly.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “There’s a difference between acting as judge, jury, and executioner, and defending yourself; it’s a matter of intent. There’s a reason the legal system prosecutes people who kill out of revenge and not people who kill in self-defense.”

“I didn’t kill Slade in self-defense though,” she told him. “He wasn’t hurting me. He didn’t even want to hurt me; he thought he was protecting me, in fact, and I took advantage of that in order to plant the charge on him.”

“He was a murderer who was hopped up on some kind of super soldier serum and who tried to kill your entire team, and he was obsessed with you. Believe me when I say that, while I wish it had never happened, I’m glad that son of a bitch is dead,” he said resolutely. “He intended to take you by force and…” he stopped, a muscle working in his jaw. “He would have hurt you,” he said in low tones. “You said it yourself; he would have taken you away and who knows how long it would have taken me before I found you again.” He tilted her chin up with his fingertips and looked her in the eye, “That said, for the record, if you had disappeared, I would’ve never stopped looking for you. I would have…” he exhaled roughly and closed his eyes, pressing his lips against her forehead once more, “I would have mourned you if you’d died, I never forgot you and I never will and, had he taken you, I would have found you no matter how long it took or how far I had to go to get you back.”

“Thank you,” she said after a moment’s pause.

“Don’t thank me for that,” he said somberly as he pulled away slightly. “Don’t ever thank me for that; thanking me means it was optional or some sort of courtesy on my part. There is nothing on Earth that can ever stop me from loving you, do you understand? Even if you left me tomorrow, I will always come for you when you need me. You’re not…” his brow furrowed, “You’re not a ghost, do you hear me? You’ve never been invisible to me, and if you died I wouldn’t be able to forget you in a day and replace you in a week. And as much as I dislike saying anything positive about Queen, I sincerely doubt that he’d be able to just bury you and walk away without so much as a second thought. I hate that I ever gave you the impression that you could be forgotten, but I never want you to ever think that again, do you hear me? Never again.”
“I was never suicidal, Bruce,” she said firmly. “I’ve never—I know it might sound that way, but I’ve never even considered it; not once. I didn’t want to die that day but…I just—I had no other options. It was the only way I could get close enough to distract him and save my team.”

“I know,” he assured her. “I know why you did it but I also know what you told me and I need you to know that, even then, you were still important to me; you’re important to a lot of people.”

“I realize that.”

“I don’t think you do,” he said honestly, “so I’m telling you, flat out, how I feel, which is that I love you and I need you. In fact, I’ve never needed anyone as much as I need you and that didn’t happen recently, or even four years ago; I started needing you when you were this tow-headed little thing in a pink tutu who took one look at me and decided that my job was to protect you from ever having to be afraid again and that your job was to do the same for me.”

“That long, huh?” She asked, a hint of amusement returning to her tone.

“That long,” he confirmed. “Although, had I known I was talking to my future wife back then…” He gave her a wry curling of his lips, “Let’s just say that I would have felt a lot more awkward about hanging your scribbles on the refrigerator.”

“You really are a dirty old man, you realize that, right?” She said smartly.

“Dirty old man, huh?” He said mockingly before capturing her mouth in a hungry kiss.

“Definitely,” she snickered then squealed when he scraped his teeth against her throat, giving the sensitive skin there a sucking kiss. He made a low growling sound and reached for the belt of her robe, “I thought we were supposed to be talking?” She asked laughing at him.

“And I thought,” he said with a naughty grin as he pulled off his towel, making a show of tossing it onto the floor, “the plan was for me to make love to you until you forgot your own name?” He kissed her again, his hand moving from her waist to her breast to pull and tease at her nipple.

“What’s your name again?”

“Felicity,” she giggled as he rubbed his rough stubble against her sensitive neck causing her to gasp and break out in goosebumps.

He kissed her then smiled against her lips, “I see I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

She sighed and arched her neck as he kissed his way down her collarbone, “But we really do need to talk though.”

He lifted his head and gave her a disgruntled look, “You’re killing me here; you know that, right?”

“Um hmm,” she said with a grin.

“Brat,” he tossed out, rolling to his side and propping his head on his hand as he continued to run his fingers down her now exposed flesh.

“Are you going to do that the entire time we’re talking?” She asked, squirming slightly as his fingers dipped dangerously low on her abdomen.

“Thinking about it,” he responded, deliberately allowing his fingers to dip even lower as he teased the fine hairs surrounding her sex then lowered his head to lick her nipple before scraping his teeth
over the delicate bud.

She gasped then managed to get out, “Okay, fine, Mr. Multi-tasker,” she closed her eyes and opened her legs involuntarily as his fingers began to stroke along her inner thighs, “What do you think my memories and the dreams are about then?”

He gave her breast another kiss before looking up at her, his fingers stilling their movements to rest at her hip, “I think it’s your mind’s way of processing the trauma you endured, simple as that. It happens all the time with soldiers in the field suffering from PTSD; you have so many confusing images filling your head that the mind comes up with a way to deal with it. Then, later on, your brain tries to correct itself by allowing the subconscious to work it out through your dreams.” He ran his hand over her forehead, smoothing a few stray curls off her face. “Chances are you probably saw a movie or something with similar images and that’s why you saw things the way you did. Now you’re having the dreams because you’re finally beginning to heal.”

“Makes sense,” she admitted. “So, what are you saying then; that the night terrors are a good thing?” She asked doubtfully.

His brow furrowed slightly before answering her, “‘Not ‘good’, per se; but a start in the right direction. You’re talking about it which is a good thing. I think another reason you’ve been having the night terrors is because you’re still worried about Slade.”

“But Slade’s dead,” she told him.

“‘Yes,” he agreed, “but from what you told me, you never actually saw Slade die, did you?”

“Yes, I did; he was in the explosion,” she objected. “He couldn’t have survived that.”

“But you didn’t see him die,” he pointed out calmly. “Logically you know that he’s gone but what happened to you was…it was beyond terrifying and extremely traumatic so Slade has become a kind of boogie man for you; something you’re afraid of, and for good reason. You never saw a body because it was destroyed in the blast so you had no visual evidence to prove to your subconscious that he’s dead. He’s managed to come after you and your team several times when he was supposed to be dead or locked away and yet he’s always come back somehow. Of course you’d feel unsafe after all you’ve been through.”

“But--!”

“Hey,” he stopped her. “You aren’t crazy. The dreams, your memories of that night; they don’t mean anything,” he placed his hand along her cheek. “You’re okay, he’s dead, he’s gone, and I’ve got you now. You’re safe. Everything is going to be alright from now on.”

She felt the knot loosen in her chest slightly at that. “That doesn’t mean the night terrors are going to go away though.”

“You didn’t have one this morning,” he pointed out.

“That’s because you were here.”

“Ah, well,” he said, his eyebrows lifting in amusement, “Guess I’ll just have to keep letting you sleep in my bed then, won’t I? Just for public safety’s sake, of course,” he teased, kissing his way down her body again.

“God, you’re an ass,” she said shaking her head.
“I’m strangely okay with that,” he told her before moving up to kiss her softly on the lips then pulling away again. “So a Martian ‘Manhunter’, huh?”

“Martian Manhunter,” she confirmed. “Sounds a bit ominous but he’s actually a very sweet guy; very spiritual in fact. I do need to warn you that, apparently, you can’t feed Martians cookies after midnight. They don’t ‘Gremlin’ out or anything, but they get drunk and then get really affectionate with the dog.”

He arched an eyebrow at that, “So last night…?”

“I was telling you the truth, yep.”

He scrubbed his hand through his hair, “And he’s coming here for dinner?”

“Uh huh,” she told him. “He’s a vegetarian though so I’m going to have to get up soon and look through the cookbooks so he has something to eat. Also, we’re out of milk so either you need to run out and get some along with whatever else I need or Luke needs to come over here soon. Dinner’s at seven and Laurel bought a thirty pound turducken, so at fifteen minutes per pound…” She did a quick calculation in her head then glanced at the clock, “Holy crap, we’re already running late!” She exclaimed, sitting up in bed and pushing him off her in alarm.

“So you’re planning on leaving me high and dry here?” He asked capturing her hand and nibbling at her fingertips.

“Bruce, we are so late,” she told him pulling her hand away. “Like we should have been dressed and in the kitchen an hour ago kind of late.”

“Dinner parties never start on time,” he reminded her as he leaned toward her to place a playful bite against her earlobe. “Besides, who says we have to feed them a thirty pound turducken when we could just call for takeout? China Town is less than ten blocks from here. I could call down and order some Peking duck instead; same difference.” She pushed him away and gave him a stern look.

“Fine.” He sighed sulkily, “Anything else I should know about this ‘J’onn’ before we get dressed?”

Felicity did the calculations in her head again and winced. Seven and a half hours couldn’t be right, could it? That’s a long time to cook a turkey, even if it was a turkey stuffed with a chicken and a duck. She noticed Bruce staring at her impatiently, “Oh, uh, he *really* likes Chocos, he can talk to the dog, and he’s a shapeshifter.”

“Fantastic,” he said flatly.

“You’re taking all this very well though,” she said helpfully.

He gave her a long-suffering look, “He’s not the first alien I’ve encountered,” he told her. “He’s not even the first shape shifter. Not that I’ve met many, but the ones I have met are a bit of a mixed bag even under the best of circumstances.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” she muttered under her breath causing him to give her another look of amusement.

“I’ll have to talk to this J’onn myself but if what he says is true, the last thing we need is for Ra’s to get ahold of that type of technology,” he agreed. “Of course, mind control was never something Ra’s was all that interested in before, but after Talia’s experiments on that subject he may have changed his mind.”

“Talia experimented with mind control?” She asked with a frown.
He nodded, “She wanted to create an army of children to serve her because she felt it would fit into Ra’s prophesy, and since they were on the outs...”

“What?” She said incredulously.

He gave her a sympathetic look, “Another part of the prophesy says that gods and heroes would come together to serve the ‘Queen of the Heaven’ and that she would bring together an army of ‘the pure ones’ to save Gaea’s paradise while she looks down upon them from the stars.’ Believe me, I know how crazy it sounds,” he said wryly. “Ra’s and Talia both take it literally however so, in order to prove to him once and for all that she was the ‘Chosen One’ since he’d rejected Damian as his true heir,” he said with a sarcastic edge, “she tried introducing a drug into the general populace using tainted milk. She thought if she could control an army of children, not only would it fit his prophesy, but no one would dare take up arms against them because they wouldn’t want to hurt their own kids.”

“That’s sick,” she said in disgust.

He nodded, “We stopped her but she wound up taking a bullet to the head in the process. We were fighting and she very nearly managed to kill me until a government agent from an organization called ‘Spyral’ put a bullet in her head and ended it once and for all.” His eyes darkened but his expression never changed, “She was beyond help by then though. Nyssa and Talia had been at war for a while and, I don’t know what happened but, fifteen or so years ago, Nyssa wound up doing something to her that forced her back into the Lazarus Pits one too many times and it finally drove her permanently insane. Not that she was ever that stable to begin with,” he added.

“Still but tainted milk? That sounds like something a bad Bond villain would come up with,” she repeated dubiously, then frowned. “Wait, whole milk or two percent?”

He looked at her slightly askance, “Does it make a difference?”

“It’s just that I prefer whole milk but after hearing that I kind of feel weird about putting any in my coffee now,” she frowned. “You know what? Never mind. Look, let’s finish this in the kitchen, okay?”

“He nodded, “We stopped her but she wound up taking a bullet to the head in the process. We were fighting and she very nearly managed to kill me until a government agent from an organization called ‘Spyral’ put a bullet in her head and ended it once and for all.” His eyes darkened but his expression never changed, “She was beyond help by then though. Nyssa and Talia had been at war for a while and, I don’t know what happened but, fifteen or so years ago, Nyssa wound up doing something to her that forced her back into the Lazarus Pits one too many times and it finally drove her permanently insane. Not that she was ever that stable to begin with,” he added.

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“Which part?” He asked, a naughty glint returning to his eye.

She offered him a withering glare, “We have a houseful of workmen and guests and you want to christen the kitchen counters?”

“I could kick them all out and we could just reserve a few tables at one of the many fine restaurants and clubs I just so happen to own. That or you could reconsider the thing with the takeout,” he suggested.

She rolled her eyes at him, “Come on, Mr. I’m-A-Billionaire, Whoo-Hoo-Look-At-Me; I-Can-Get-A-Table-Without-Reservations!”

“That’s an awfully long nickname,” he said drolly. “You might want to rethink that one if you’re going to be using it on a regular basis.”

She gave him a less than amused look, “We have really got to get dressed; like right now. The good news is that now you too can experience how the little people live by helping me peel some vegetables.”

“Just one problem with that; I can’t cook,” he reminded her. “At all, or have you forgotten?”
“I’m not asking you to cook, I’m asking you to use a knife and a vegetable peeler. I happen to know for a fact that you can do that,” she shot back. “Or do they have to be shaped like tiny little bats before you can touch them?”

“Nag, nag, nag.” He complained jokingly as he got out of bed and headed to the dresser. “You know, seriously though; instead of cooking this thing yourself, you could have just told me what you wanted to do today and I would have had Alfred hire a caterer or something. This whole thing just sounds like a lot of work and little to no pay off at the end of it.”

“The whole point of cooking Thanksgiving dinner is to *cook* Thanksgiving dinner,” she said as she headed into the closet to grab them some clothes. She decided on a simple t-shirt and jeans along with a pair of the slippers Bruce got her. She could change for dinner later.

Actually, she’d have to. She’d never quite mastered the art of keeping herself tidy while cooking. Even if it was just some scrambled eggs and toast, she always wound up with half of it smeared all over her somehow.

“It’s February, not November,” he reminded her.

“Did you get to have Thanksgiving dinner last year, because I didn’t.”

He paused. “Actually…no; Harley decided to go on a rampage with Poison Ivy so we missed it.”

“Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy?” She asked poking her head out of the closet, “They’re a team now?”

He grimaced, “Ever since Joker died Harley’s been at loose ends. The best I can say about it is that at least Ivy isn’t as violent as most of my Rogue’s Gallery and she’s never actually killed anyone, so she’s at least somewhat of a good influence…even though they’re both insane.”

“What did they do?”

He grumbled under his breath before answering, “They stole a bunch of pets from a pet shop after Harley stole a dog from a man she thought was being mean to it, then dragged him by a leash behind her motorcycle in the middle of the freeway.”

“A pet shop,” she said slowly.

He gave a disgruntled noise from the back of his throat, “Harley decided it was also mean to keep animals in cages and Ivy, well, who knows why Ivy does anything.”

She blinked, “Did she kill him; the guy with the dog?”

“No; she did, however, manage to get away and keep all the pets she stole including his dog, which he was not happy about.” He grimaced, “We managed to stop them before they broke into the zoo though. Apparently there were some newborn hyena pups on exhibit and, according to Ivy, she really wanted to get Harley some because, and I quote, ’she likes the way they sound when they laugh’ end quote.”

“Seriously?” She asked him and he nodded, “Yeah, well, only in Gotham,” she said sympathetically. “Meanwhile, last year, instead of turkey and stuffing, my team was stuck tracking a French assassin calling herself ‘Cheshire’ who liked to dress up like a Japanese cat-girl so, February or not, we’re having Thanksgiving. T-shirt or regular shirt?” She asked him as she grabbed them both some jeans then snagged a hot pink t-shirt for herself.
“If I have to go run errands, a button down or a sweater,” he told her resignedly so she grabbed both. “Uh, Baby?” He asked as she emerged from the closet with their clothes in hand. “Did Alfred happen to stop by while I was gone?”

“No, why?” She asked as she moved over to the dresser to grab a bra and panty set.

He held out a brightly colored pair of socks with Union Jacks all over them.

“Oh yeah, I bought you some socks and underwear,” she said absently as she tugged on the pretty set of cotton panties she bought the day before. Since she was shopping for replacement socks and sweaters for Bruce along with some stuff for Laurel and Renee, she went ahead and got herself a few things as well. Silk lingerie was nice but it wasn’t all that practical and she liked the comfort of cotton panties and t-shirt bras even if they weren’t particularly sexy.

“You bought me socks?” He asked uncertainly as he looked at them again then glanced back into the drawer. “A lot of socks. Very…colorful socks. And underwear.”

“I also got you a few sweaters, see?” She held up the dark burgundy Burberry Brit cashmere sweater she found on sale. “They were having winter clearance so I went a little wild. I mean, seriously, up to fifty percent off cashmere and men’s wear; are you kidding me?”

“So I see…” he pulled out some red and black Dolce and Gabbana boxer briefs and a cashmere/silk blend Henley.

“You don’t have to wear them if you don’t want to,” she told him as she put on her bra then sat down on the bed to tug on her jeans. “I replaced all your boring colored socks that I borrowed with even more boring colored socks; I just bought the cool looking ones so I’d have something to steal when my feet got cold.” She looked up with a frown, “By the way, did you know they sell men’s pantyhose now?”

“You bought me pantyhose?” He turned to her incredulously.

“No,” she told him, “Although that wouldn’t be a bad idea,” she mused. “You could wear them under the Batsuit because they wouldn’t be bulky and could offer a little extra warmth.” She zipped up her pants then pulled on her shirt.

“I think not,” he said with a grimace as he tossed the Union Jack socks and designer underwear on the bed despite her telling him he didn’t have to wear them.

“They called them ‘beltless transparent socks’ but they were definitely pantyhose,” she dug through the boxes near the bed and took out a bright pink pair of sleeping bunny slippers.

He gave her a long suffering look as he tugged them on. “Okay, thank you for the socks; I will wear the socks *and* the underwear, but there will be no pantyhose under the armor.”

“Fine, no cross dressing for the Bat; got it.” She got up to leave but he tugged her close on her way past and wrapped his arms around her waist, “Bruce, thirty pounds at fifteen minutes per pound is seven and a half hours,” she said as he put his hands on her butt and tugged her even closer until she was standing between his legs.

“Sounds about right,” he grinned, placing a kiss on her stomach over her shirt.

“I have to go,” she told him with an exasperated sigh as she finger combed his hair off his forehead.

“Hmm,” he hummed, kissing her stomach again, “Move in with me.”
“I will,” she promised. “After we close this case.”

“Tonight.”

“Bruce…” she said warningly.

“Tomorrow night then; better yet, tomorrow morning.” Before she could object he raised an eyebrow at her, “We’re getting married Sunday, remember?”

“Secret married,” she reminded him. “‘Secret’ being the key word here because Isabel still probably has eyes on me.”

“So we’ll secretly move in together,” he mumbled against her then gave her a lusty smirk. “We could re-christen the Batcave for the secret honeymoon, plus there’s no workmen there.”

“No, just Alfred, Dick, and, oh yeah, Oliver. Plus, I’m not having sex in front of bats,” she said firmly as she gave him a quick peck on the lips, “Again. Once was enough and now that I know that dogs can talk I don’t even want to think about what bats can do.” She disentangled herself, “Now get dressed because you, Mr. Billionaire, are going on a tofurkey run so our friendly neighborhood Martian doesn’t have to have a conversation with the dead bird on the table.” She stopped as a horrible thought occurred to her, “Oh God, if dead turkeys can talk what do you think a dead turkey stuffed with a dead duck and a dead chicken would say?”

He looked at her in confusion, “Is that some kind of riddle because Nygma’s usual repertoire didn’t really go into meats that often; chicken or the egg, but no tofurkey or turducken as I recall.”

“It’s a Martian thing,” she said waving him off. “They can sense—you know what, never mind,” she told him. “You really don’t want to know because if I told you then, like me, you’d be wondering how the turkey feels about having two other birds stuffed up his hoo hah. It just…” she wrinkled her nose slightly, “it can’t be good.”

“I imagine the duck and the chicken aren’t too happy about it either,” he deadpanned.

She gave him a scathing look, “Get dressed,” she said as she headed to the kitchen.

“Guess the honeymoon’s over,” he said wryly as he tugged on his trousers.

“You used that one last week already,” she called out just as she shut the door.

She took a few extra seconds to admire how the entire room was coming together as she headed into the kitchen. Several more couches and chairs had been delivered along with the billiard’s table and gaming stations. By tonight it might actually look like an apartment and not a disaster area, she thought as she walked through the kitchen door.

Laurel and Renee were already up, the former peeking at something in the oven while the latter nursed a cup of coffee at the table, “Hey, did you put the--?”

“Yup,” Laurel said straightening up. “I read the instructions on the turducken package last night so I set an alarm.”

“You changed your hair color?” Felicity asked in surprise.

“You like it?” Laurel grinned, fluffing the ends of her newly streaked and lightened locks playfully. “Renee helped me with it at her place this morning since we wound up missing the meeting. Not bad for right out of the box, huh?”
“My stepmother was a hairdresser,” Renee shrugged. “I learned some stuff whether I wanted to or not.”

“It’s great,” she beamed. “Blonde.”

“I needed a change,” she shrugged. “I thought about going red but with my natural color, auburn usually just turns to chestnut which is basically what it usually is anyway, so…”

“No, it’s good,” she told her. “You can never have too many smart blondes in the world.” She eyed her own loose locks with a disgruntled look, “I’ve actually been thinking about changing mine but I can’t decide what color to pick.”

“Purple,” Renee said, sipping her coffee.

“Purple?” She asked dubiously.

“I always wanted to dye my hair purple but they kind of frown on that sort of thing at the precinct,” she nodded. “Plus I’d have to bleach my hair first, give it time to rest, then go purple, but since your hair is already a light blonde we could just do it all at once. That or blue. Hot pink’s good, too. Actually hot pink on you would be pretty hot.”

“Hot pink, huh?” she said, looking at her hair again.

“Definitely,” the other woman nodded.

“Yeah…I don’t know,” Felicity said wrinkling her nose slightly. “I think the most extreme I’d ever go is auburn. Maybe brunette, but no pink. Purple sounds interesting though.”

“I love purple hair,” Renee said wistfully. “I always wanted a streak of purple but my stepmother refused to let me do it. She said the neighbors would all think I was a devil worshipper or something.”

“If you really want purple hair you could have purple hair. Nothing’s stopping you since you’re not a cop anymore,” Laurel offered helpfully.

“Yeah, but I’m still a PI when I’m not being a hero under the cover of darkness,” she said casually, tossing a piece of Pop Tart into her mouth and chewing thoughtfully. “Clients don’t like hiring people with purple hair to take pictures of their wives doing the nasty with the pool boy.”

“Well, I have good news and bad news,” Felicity told her. “The good news is that as a Bird you now work for Orbital which means that you get paid some pretty decent money just for doing what you do.”

“Really?” She said in surprise. “That come with dental?”

“Yup.”

“Cool,” she nodded. “What’s the bad news?”

“We’re probably going to be shutting Orbital down soon so I’d go ahead and schedule a cleaning while you still can.”

“Shit,” she said looking downcast then sighed, “Oh well. So, did you hook up with tall, dark, and grim last night?”

She answered her with a smug grin as she brought her coffee cup along with the tablet from the
charging dock over to the table.

“Oh, so I actually get to meet the mysterious Mr. Wayne at long last?” Laurel asked bringing her own breakfast pastries and coffee to the table and sitting at what had quickly become her spot, which was over by Renee on the far end of the table.

“That would be me,” Bruce said walking into the kitchen.

“Laurel,” she said nodding at him.

“Bruce,” he returned. “Morning Renee,” he nodded at the woman still picking at the sprinkles on her strawberry Pop Tart before kissing the top of Felicity’s hair then walking over to the pot to pour himself a cup.

“Closer to afternoon, actually,” she told him before leaning towards Laurel with a smirk. “You can’t tell, but it’s killing him to call me by my first name right now.” She raised her eyebrows at him, “Relax, Batbrain; there’s no civilians in here.”

He threw her a chastising look before picking up his cup and sitting beside Felicity, “Yes, but there are plenty of them outside of the kitchen.”

“And they are all too busy banging on things to bother with us, so pull the stick out and stay a while.” She looked down at her sugary breakfast with a frown. “I shouldn’t be eating this crap,” she muttered.

“Give me a minute and I’ll fix us brunch,” Felicity said absently as she scrolled through the recipes on her tablet.

“No, this is fine,” Renee told her. “It’s just that every time I eat sugary crap I want a cigarette and I quit less than a couple of months ago. Actually, I always want a cigarette I just want it more after sugary crap. That and sex. I really miss smoking a cigarette after sex.” Bruce threw her a look, “What?”

“Nothing,” he said taking a sip of coffee.

“I just miss sex,” Laurel told her before turning to Bruce who was looking at her with an arched eyebrow. “By the way, Felicity’s told me a lot of good things about you.”

Felicity snorted, “And usually I’m the one making the inappropriate remarks first thing in the morning.”

“Not that she mentioned, you know,” Laurel said with a casual wave of her hand.

“Yes, well, I wish she’d told me more about you before apparently opening my home to every wayward vigilante out of Starling City,” he said dryly.

“Bruce…” Felicity said warningly.

“No offense,” he added, albeit insincerely.

“See? Told you,” Renee said, hitching her thumb at him. “I’m only surprised he managed thirty whole seconds worth of polite conversation before showing you just how big of an asshole he could be.”

Bruce had his mouth open to say something but stopped to throw Renee a dirty look instead,
“Hilarious.”

“But true,” she shrugged, still picking at her frosting.

“How do rosemary lemon garlic baked rutabaga fries sound?” Felicity asked, looking up from the tablet. “Because I bought rutabagas and I have no idea what to do with them so I’m just going to feed them to J’onn.”

“Sounds good,” Renee nodded. “Now what does a rutabaga taste like?”

She shrugged, “I have no idea; Laurel?”

“Mom didn’t cook and dad made Italian,” she told her. “As far as I know, rutabagas are not an Italian staple. I have eaten a lot of eggplant though.”

“Ooh, eggplant; I bought eggplant,” she muttered as she made a notation on her shopping list. “Bruce?”

“Eggplant’s fine,” he said, pulling out his phone and thumbing through it absently.

She looked up at him, “Not eggplant; rutabagas.”

“I have no idea,” he said looking up at her. “I just eat what Alfred makes and it’s usually some French…thing.”

“So hopeless,” she muttered. “Someone is going to have to make a grocery run, by the way.”

“Are you kidding?” Renee goggled at her. “We bought like…how many cartloads of groceries was it again?”

“Six,” Laurel supplied.

“You bought six cartloads of groceries for one dinner?” Bruce asked with a frown. “How many people are coming to this thing anyway?”

“It wasn’t all for the dinner,” she told him. “The place was empty so we had to buy basic staples along with a bunch of other…stuff.”

“That still doesn’t tell me how many people are coming to dinner tonight,” he pointed out.

“Um, I don’t know; I haven’t counted,” she frowned.

“You haven’t counted?” He repeated.

“Okay, well, there’s me, you, Laurel, Renee…”

“Sara, Lyla, Gypsy, Katana, Helena,” Laurel added.

“Huntress is coming over for dinner?” Bruce asked testily, “Since when?”

“Since I kind of invited her…I think,” Felicity said carefully. “Actually, yeah, I invited her.”

“Don’t forget Wildcat, Luke, Dick, and Alfred,” Renee reminded her, cutting off whatever it was Bruce was about to say.

“Oliver,” Laurel supplied. “J’onn.”
“Oh, and I invited Barda and Sonia and Wildcat mentioned he might invite Ted and Booster since they were thinking of playing poker after dinner,” Felicity added.

“Who the hell are all these people?” Bruce asked. “And why the hell is Huntress coming to dinner after she nearly killed you the other day.”

“To be fair, Felicity kicked Helena’s ass a lot worse than Helena kicked hers,” Laurel offered supportively. “I saw what she looked like and Felicity totally broke her nose and everything. She looked like a raccoon.”

Felicity shot her a grateful look, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she nodded.

Bruce looked between them with a mixture of irritation and incredulity, “Why in the hell would you-?”

She waved him off, “Too late; it’s done. Besides, she’s on the team now, so…”

“Since when?” He burst out.

“Since Orbital hired her,” she said roundly before turning to Laurel and Renee, “So that’s….” she counted them up in her head, “Nineteen people for dinner.”

“You’re going to need a bigger table,” Renee said looking at the kitchen table dubiously. “This thing is plenty big but it’s not nineteen people big.”

“Plus, you never know, somebody might decide to bring a date or something,” Laurel added. “Does this table come with any of those leaf things?”

“I don’t know, I’ll have to call Tam and find out,” Felicity said with a frown.

Bruce glowered at her, “You invited nineteen masks, including Huntress, to the penthouse for dinner and you’re just now telling me this?”

“If you don’t want to come you don’t have to,” she told him with a shrug.

“If you think for one minute I’m letting that woman anywhere near you without me being here…” he growled.

“I can handle Helena,” she said waving him off again. “The big question is, how are we going to fit all those people at the table?”

“You could do it buffet style and get a bunch of tray tables so we can eat in the living room?” Renee suggested.

“The penthouse has a formal dining room that can easily seat twenty-five,” he told her, his expression still less than chipper at the prospect.

All three women looked at him.

“We can’t have Friendsgiving in the formal dining room,” Felicity said flatly.

“Friendsgiving?” He repeated dubiously.

“Yeah, Friendsgiving; keep up,” Renee told him.
He shot her a dirty look before turning to Felicity, “What’s wrong with the formal dining room?”

“Because friends and family eat at the kitchen table; the dining room is for strangers,” she said easily.

“Most of these people are strangers,” he said testily, “Speaking of which, how exactly are you planning on having this dinner without exposing everyone’s civilian identities?”

“What do you mean?” She asked with a frown. “I already know their civilian identities.”

“Yes, but they don’t know mine or my team’s,” he pointed out tersely.

Renee snorted.

“What?” He asked her with a scowl.

“I mean, Bruce; come on…” she said leadingly.

“Come on what?” He demanded.

“The Bat wears state of the art armor that practically has ‘WayneTech’ stamped on the ass and drives a multi-million dollar tank,” she countered. “It’s fairly obvious when you think about it. I mean, it took me all of five seconds to figure out that you were probably the guy behind the mask. Who else could afford that kind of equipment, lives here in Gotham, and looks like they sprinkle steroids on their cereal for breakfast?” She asked sardonically, “It was either you or Lex Luthor and since Luthor is in Metropolis most of the time; you’re it.”

“She has a point,” Laurel admitted.

“Suspecting and knowing are two different things,” he countered. “Plus, whenever people started speculating on that I always made sure to have plenty of witnesses see me in my civvies while someone else put on the costume.”

“Yeah, because that’s never been done before,” Felicity muttered, ignoring the chastising look he tossed in her direction.

“The point is that I don’t know these people and I don’t feel comfortable exposing my identity to people I don’t trust,” he said.

“So don’t come,” Felicity said easily.

“Or just un-invite the people we don’t know,” he offered instead.

“I do know them, Bruce; that’s why I invited them,” she said roundly then at his darkening expression, sighed, “Look, you really don’t have to come. This was originally just supposed to be for the Birds and just snowballed from there. We can do something else tomorrow, just the two of us.”

“Oh, I’m coming,” he said flatly. “Like I said, there’s no way in hell I’m letting Helena Bertinelli anywhere near you.”

“Fine, then if you aren’t comfortable coming as Bruce Wayne then you can just show up in the cape and cowl,” she told him. “That said, since everyone else is going to be dressed in normal clothes and not battle armor and masks, you’re going to look a little ridiculous.”

His jaw clenched, “What if someone decides to expose your identity? Did you ever think of that?”

“They already know who we are and, besides; they’re all masks. Who are they going to tell?” She
asked with a shrug. “Just do what you want; if you want to come as the Bat, come; if not then don’t.” She turned to Laurel and Renee, “We need milk…and apparently Chocos,” she added reluctantly as Ace meandered happily through the doggie door to remind her.

“Are you sure that’s such a good idea?” Laurel asked giving her a meaningful look as the dog flopped down on his oversized pallet near his dishes.

“Probably not,” she admitted, “but I figured we could give him one or two after dinner like a glass of wine then hide the rest of the bag. Along with the milk.”

“What am I missing here?” Bruce (who had been stewing silently for all of two seconds) asked suspiciously.

“The alien got high on cookies and milk last night,” Renee said bluntly. “If seeing that wasn’t so terrifying it would have been funny as shit.”

Bruce froze, his cup stopping just short of his lips and turned to look at her, “What?”

“Tripping. Balls,” Renee said roundly as Laurel nodded.

“I already told you about that, remember? The after midnight Mogwai thing,” Felicity reminded him as she continued to scroll through a recipe list of vegan and vegetarian dishes. “I’m going to try to make a spinach and gruyere cheese puff. Martha Stewart says it’s easy and makes a good meatless Thanksgiving turkey substitute but she could be lying.”

“That’s true,” Renee nodded as she sipped her coffee, “After all she is an ex-con.”

“Hey, back off of Martha,” Laurel told her. “That was some patriarchal male bullshit and she should have been given a plea deal with no jail time just like all the men who were indicted along with her. I mean, she deserved to be fined but she was an investor, not an executive. The only reason they went after her was because she was a woman. And, by the way, where the hell was Ken Lay who was chairman of Enron when its $9 billion collapse in 2001 ended the jobs of more than 5,000 workers and decimated the retirement savings of millions of investors? I’ll tell you where he was; playing golf with his good buddy, Dubya, that’s where. If Martha had been a man and a Republican, it never would have made it to the courtroom in the first place.”

“Power to the people!” Felicity said from the other end of the table without looking up from her recipes.

“I stand corrected,” Renee said throwing her hands up in acquiescence. “As for Martha’s recipe; spinach gruyere your ass off but I’m still not eating it. I’m in this thing for the turkey and pie so that I can blame you for my big fat ass later.”

“I’m going for it,” Felicity decided. “I mean, it’s got to taste better than the dog did, right?”

Bruce narrowed his eyes at her, “The dog?”


“Fine,” Bruce grumbled crossly.

Renee smirked then looked down the table at Felicity who was still studying her tablet intently, “Hey, if you run into any problems maybe Bruce can call Martha and she can cook dinner for you. Don’t all you billionaires hang out together anyway?”
“I’m afraid I’ve never actually had the pleasure,” Bruce said sarcastically before giving Laurel a dispassionate look, “However, going back to what you were saying before; as I recall, Martha Stewart, who was a billionaire and a former stock broker herself, received jail time mostly because of the fact that she lied to Federal prosecutors about her insider trading and served all of five months of a potential twenty year prison sentence in a minimum security federal country club. Also, when she spoke of her convictions for lying to federal investigators about her ImClone stock sale, she called the nearly two hundred and seventy-seven thousand dollar profit she made from it ‘a small personal matter’ that had been blown out of proportion.” He took a sip of his coffee before speaking again, “One would think that a former district attorney would take a harsher stance on perjury but, then again, you have had a few brushes with the law yourself, have you not?”

Felicity and Renee stopped what they were doing to stare at him as Laurel slowly put down her coffee and observed him with a cool and calculating gaze, “Meaning?”

“You were using drugs and driving under the influence while, at the same time, prosecuting drug dealers and drunk drivers; that’s a bit hypocritical of you, don’t you think?”

“Bruce…” Felicity said warningly.

“No, it’s okay,” Laurel shrugged coolly, “It’s a fair question; after all, I was a DA and an addict so, yeah; I own that.”

“Good to know,” Bruce nodded.

“I mean, you’re a lawyer, too, right?” Laurel asked him. “You went to Yale?”

He looked at her carefully, “I did, yes, but I never practiced.”

“I went to Yale, too, so…” she nodded. “Did you pass the bar?”

“Yes,” he said warily.

“Hmm,” she nodded, “So you, an officer of the court, are knowingly committing the crime of vigilantism; are you planning on arresting yourself anytime soon?”

A muscle began to tick in his jaw, “No.”

She snapped her fingers, “Oh yeah, that’s right; because you’re not a cop. You can’t actually arrest anyone; all you can do is beat criminals to a pulp and--” She turned to Renee, “I’m sorry, I’m not from Gotham; how much property damage was Batman responsible for last year? Ballpark?”

“A lot,” Renee admitted then turned to Bruce, “Seriously, you have got to get rid of the missiles on the tumbler and put some rubber on those tires. My property taxes on the loft shot up by almost two hundred and fifty bucks last year.”

Bruce ignored her and looked directly at Laurel instead, “Do you want last year’s figures or the total since the beginning of the Bat’s mission?”

“Either/or,” she told him.

“Last year Batman was at least partially responsible for a little over six million dollars’ worth of property damage and, over the entire course of the mission, nearly eighty million dollars altogether,” he said easily.

“That’s a lot of gruyere right there,” Renee said with a low whistle.
“However,” Bruce emphasized, “Wayne Enterprises along with the Wayne Foundation picked up the tab for most of that through our many charities along with the Gotham Historical Society and The Gotham City Rejuvenation Fund, both of which are almost entirely supported by me personally.”

“Plus, it helps that half the buildings in this damn city have his name on it, so he’s basically just blowing up his own shit half the time,” she added.

“Good to know,” Laurel nodded.

“And why’s that?” Bruce asked.

Felicity closed her eyes and waited for what she just knew was coming next.

“Because I was stuck trying to come up with a fun sister bonding activity for when Sara gets home and there’s nothing she likes better than blowing shit up.”

Renee snorted causing Bruce to turn a jaundiced eye in her direction, “You think that’s funny, Question?”

“I think it’s fucking hilarious,” she said honestly.

“And what do you think?” He asked, turning to Felicity.

“I’m going to exercise my right not to comment on that,” Felicity said with pursed lips.

“Oh?” Bruce asked in a deceptively casual tone, “And why’s that?”

At Laurel’s accusatory look she grudgingly admitted, “Because I *might* have been the one to plan the whole ‘blowing up’ of said ‘shit’ the last three or four--”

“Five,” Laurel corrected.

“Five times,” then reluctantly added, “Plus I also may have helped to actually set the charges.” His eyebrows drew together in an annoyed expression as she gave him a sheepish look, “But to be fair two of those didn’t even really count because both times the buildings belonged to Oliver and he gave us permission to blow them up, and the other two times were warehouses that belonged to bad guys and were filled with drugs and weapons so it was actually more of a public service kind of thing.”

Bruce cleared his throat and ran his hand over his hair before looking towards the ceiling and doing, what appeared to be a quick ten count, “That’s four.”

“Hmm?” She hummed innocently.

“That’s four buildings,” he said slowly. “You said you planned five of these little team bonding moments.”

“Oh, right,” she said off-handedly. “That one didn’t count either.”

Renee let out a rude snicker before covering her mouth with her hand.

“And why, may I ask, doesn’t it count?” Bruce asked with a forced smile.

“Because the building belonged to one of her exes and he was kind of an asshole,” Laurel said as she took a healthy bite out of her Pop Tart.
Bruce’s face darkened in anger once more and Felicity held up a hand to ward off the oncoming Bat-
tantrum, “First off, he wasn’t my ex; we barely went on one date together and it never even got past
the appetizer course. Secondly, we didn’t blow it up because of him, we blew it up because someone
working there was manufacturing a mind control drug and we needed to get rid of it without risking
anyone else getting exposed. The fact that he completely and totally deserved it is beside the point.”

“Yeah, he could afford it,” Laurel said with a shrug. “After all, he was a billionaire…and a mask…
and an asshole.” She looked at Bruce again, “Turns out she really does have a type.”

That time, Renee didn’t even bother hiding her amusement as she began to laugh, “I love it. That’s
funny,” she said wiping her eyes. “Oh my God, I needed that.”

“And who exactly was this billionaire ex of yours?” Bruce asked ignoring the other two women, his
attention fully on Felicity now. “Not Queen, I take it.”

“Thank you,” Felicity told Laurel with a grimace. “Really. I really appreciate being,” she made a
clicking noise with her tongue and made a cutting gesture, “tossed right under the bus like that.”

“Sorry.”

Felicity had lived with Tam most of her life so she understood the many layered language known as
‘passive aggressive sisterly bitch-speak’ fluently which is how she was able to interpret Laurel’s
apology, not as an ‘I’m sorry but not sorry for screwing you over’ sorry, but instead as more of a
‘your boyfriend is an asshole and you should dump him so I’m helping you with that’ sorry.

“Yeah,” she said darkly, sending her own message the other woman’s way before turning to Bruce
again, “Like I said before, he wasn’t an ex; we never even finished our first and only date. We never
even really *started* our first and only date. Secondly, I can’t tell you his name because he’s a
mask,” Felicity said firmly.

“Daniel Garret,” Laurel informed him blithely. “You know, the rich, incredibly handsome, billionaire
genius with movie star good looks who climbs Mt. Everest a few times a year just for the hell of it
and who also happens to be a world renowned archaeologist.” She took a sip of her coffee before
adding, “Oh, and your company just bought the rights to his life story for like a gazillion dollars. Of
course, from what I hear it’s a shoe-in for a Oscar so…”

By this point, Bruce looked beyond pissed, “You dated Daniel Garret and he happens to also be a
mask. And you didn’t tell me this; is he coming to dinner as well?”

“No,” she said slowly.

“Damn, that’s a shame; I always wanted to meet him,” Renee said with a frown as she pretended to
ignore the filthy look Bruce was directing towards her.

“Maybe you should try calling him?” Laurel suggested with a smirk. “After all, he did tell you that
anytime you changed your mind, he’d be willing to hop a jet, remember?”

“What does she mean ‘change your mind’; change your mind about what?” Bruce asked in a low
growl.

“Daniel wanted Felicity to leave Team Arrow and partner up with him instead…in more ways than
one,” Laurel said off-handedly. “Oh, and while we’re on the subject; you know in the movie there’s
this beautiful blonde secretary/sidekick who he’s supposed to be madly in love with in this ‘will
they/won’t they’ kind of way? You know, the one who he has this huge love scene with that got it
bumped from a PG-13 to an R? That character is totally based on Felicity.” She paused with an
exaggerated frown, “Huh, that’s funny; I just realized something. You actually paid some guy a ton of money so he could act out his fantasy of having sex with your girlfriend in front of millions of people.” She shook her head in mock sympathy, “Damn, guess you probably do feel like an asshole right about now, huh?”

Renee was now holding her hands over her face, her shoulders shaking in silent laughter as Bruce slowly turned to look at her.

“Again, thank you Laurel,” Felicity said tightly.

“Not a problem,” she said easily.

“Alright-y then,” she said with false cheer. “I’m going to get started on prep while you and Renee go pick up a few things at the grocery store. I’m texting you the list now. Don’t forget the milk and tofurkey.”

“Guess I’m driving,” Renee said still snickering as she got up from the table.

“Nice meeting you Bruce,” Laurel said shooting him an evil grin as she placed her cup in the sink and headed after the other woman.

“You as well,” Bruce said in what was most definitely a lie judging from both his expression and tone of voice.

As soon as they were gone she got up to begin collecting all the bowls, cutting boards, knives, and peelers she’d need to start the prep.

“Daniel Garret, huh?” He asked, still fuming as he sipped at his coffee.

“He’s not an ex,” she told him for the umpteenth time, rolling her eyes as she set everything in her arms down then went back for a second load.

“But you dated?”

“One,” she said tightly as she snatched a peeler from the drawer, “One date. Not even one date because Oliver showed up to clock him in the jaw about five seconds after I ordered my steak. I didn’t even get a doggie bag out of it much less a kiss, so not a date.” She put the bowls and colanders down on the table along with the peeler then went to the fridge to start gathering vegetables.

“Is what she said about the secretary in the movie true? Is that you?” He asked, getting up so he could watch as she pulled out several produce bags filled with veggies.

She sighed in exasperation then began shoving food at him, “Yes, okay? But nothing ever happened. He put that crap in the movie in order to sell tickets; what part of ‘he’s an asshole’ didn’t you understand? And, by the way, while we’re on the subject, if you happen to get tickets to the premiere then you can just give them away, or take someone else, because I have zero desire to see some Hollywood starlet with plastic boobs pretend to be me while bouncing up and down on Daniel Garret’s stand-in. He offered me the real deal and I turned him down cold. Also, some people might enjoy this whole jealous grumpy Bat crap, but I don’t, so knock it off! Now make yourself useful and go put those on the table then go get the sweet potatoes out of the pantry.”

He grimaced but did as she asked even as he ignored the most important bits, “So Laurel was telling the truth then; he did proposition you?”
“No, actually,” she told him as she brought a large bowl of fruit to the table. “What he offered to do was date me ‘for real’, since the only reason he started dating me to begin with was so he could get inside of Oliver’s operation and see what the Arrow had going on behind closed doors. So to speak,” she added when she realized that might have not been the best choice of words.

From the unamused glower on Bruce’s face she could tell he caught it, too.

“He also asked me to join his operation and I said ‘thanks, but no thanks,’ because I had no desire to work with someone who would attempt to use me to get to Oliver like that.”

“So you were never really--?”

“Go get the potatoes before I hit you with something,” she ordered in her Loud Voice as she began peeling carrots.

“Fair enough,” he said dryly as he went for the potatoes.

When Renee and Laurel returned an hour or so later it was with several bags of groceries filled with everything she’d requested plus take out which the other woman placed on the table with an contrite expression.

“Sorry,” she said as she handed her the large carton of duck noodles.

“S’kay,” Felicity said with a forgiving look as they put aside the prepped vegetables and all began to eat.

Although Laurel and Bruce continued to circle each other warily, a few minutes later Felicity managed to break the ice by continuing their conversation from earlier once Renee locked the door to the kitchen as a conciliatory gesture just in case any of the workmen did decide to wander in.

“So did Talia come up with this mind control drug herself or…?”

“Talia?” Laurel asked.

“Apparently Ra’s has another daughter named ‘Talia’,,” Felicity told her. “Had, I mean. Apparently she’s dead now.”

“I wonder why Sara never mentioned her,” Laurel frowned.

“Probably because she was insane and no longer had any connection to the League,” Bruce told her. “The repeated exposure to the Lazarus Pits bent and twisted her mind to the point that she was no longer capable of thinking rationally. She’d been exiled from Nanda Parbat for years and neither Nyssa or Ra’s would even acknowledge her.”

“So why was she trying to come up with a mind control drug?” Renee asked.

“She was trying to prove, once and for all, that she was the chosen one of Ra’s prophesy by leading a children’s army and creating a legion of Damian’s clones.” He turned to Laurel, “Damian was my son.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. I’m so sorry for your loss,” she said quietly.

“Thank you,” he nodded.
“What is this prophesy anyway?” Renee asked. “Dragon mentioned something about it once but I never really caught the whole thing; something about Ra’s believing he’s the second coming or something?”

“Not quite,” Bruce said wryly. “Like I told Felicity, Ra’s prophesy is a bunch of nonsense that changes every time he uses the pits but the gist of it is that one of his daughters will be ‘marked by the gods’ and granted special gifts that she’ll pass on to her offspring who will also be the child of his most worthy adversary. The child will lead a new world free from the evil of men and that gods and heroes would come together to serve the ‘Queen of the Heaven’, in other words either Talia or Nyssa, and that she would bring together an army of ‘the pure ones’ to save Gaea’s paradise while she looks down upon them from the stars.”

“That sounds like some trippy bullshit alright,” Renee snorted as used her chopsticks to pop a piece of broccoli into her mouth. “They must be smoking the good stuff up in Nanda Parbat.”

“The Lazarus Pits cause extreme hallucinations and psychotic episodes,” Bruce agreed. “The more you use them, the worse they get until the effects eventually become permanent.”

“But they can really heal people and bring the dead back to life?” Laurel asked him.

He nodded, “At a cost though. The one time I used the Pits I was in a psychotic episode that lasted for days and contracted a high fever that lasted nearly a week. After that, I was fine but I wouldn’t want to go through that a second time because, like I said, every time you use the Pits you run the risk of permanently turning into a soulless monster.”

“Yeah, talk about a rock or a hard place,” Renee grimaced. “No wonder Vic didn’t want to risk using the Lazarus Pits.”

“Anyway, to answer your original question, Talia didn’t develop the drug; she enlisted a scientist who was a former Nazi to help her with the mind control formula along with the cloning process.”

“She hired a Nazi?” Felicity asked in disgust. “I thought you said Talia’s mother was Jewish?”

“Dr. Daedalus, that was the scientist’s handle, wasn’t a true Nazi. He was, but he wasn’t,” he clarified, “He didn’t give a damn about politics or wholesale genocide; all he cared about his own twisted brand of science which involved human experimentation and genetic manipulation. Still, you’re right,” he said grimly. “She was so far gone by then though…”

“What happened to him?” Laurel asked.

“Daedalus?” He took a deep breath before answering, “Dead. He was killed before we could capture him.”

“You said you were going to tell me about Dusan,” Felicity reminded him. At the other two women’s inquiring looks, she explained, “Apparently Talia and Nyssa had a brother we didn’t know about either.”

“Dusan,” he said darkly, then grimaced. “In order to tell you about Dusan, I have to start at the very beginning.”

“I’m game,” Renee shrugged. “I’m kind of curious about this stuff myself since I always thought Nyssa was it; I mean, after all, she’s supposed to be the Heir to the Demon, right?”

“Yeah, if Ra’s has a son then where is this Dusan guy?” Laurel asked.
“Dead,” Bruce told them. “The permanent kind of dead but, like I said, in order to tell you about Dusan, I have to tell you about Ra’s and that’s…difficult,” he said ruefully. “There’s not a lot about him out there and most of what I do know was told to me either by Talia or Ra’s himself so the stories are never consistent from one retelling to the next. What I do know, however, is that all of this started somewhere near Egypt or Iraq several hundred years ago.” He paused as if to gather his thoughts, “Ra’s, himself, isn’t Egyptian or from the Middle East. We don’t know where he’s from or even what his real name is, although there are different theories. Even Talia didn’t know; all she’d say was that Ra’s buried his true name long ago when he took on the mantle of the Demon’s Head.”

“Okay, I want to hear about that, but first I have a question,” Renee broke in.

Bruce turned to her, “What?”

“I keep hearing his name pronounced either ‘Rahs’ or ‘Resh’; which is it? Because Dragon said ‘Resh’ but Vic said ‘Rahs.’”

“Nyssa said ‘Resh’,” Felicity said jumping in. “I always wondered about that too because ‘Resh’ is—”

“The Hebrew pronunciation of the letter ‘R’,” he finished for her.

“So which is it?” Felicity asked him. “Because you said Nyssa was Jewish so…?”

“It’s either/or if you’re referring to the star,” he told her. “However, Ra’s says ‘Resh’ which also leads me to believe his origins begin with the Khazars because they use the Hebrew alphabet.”

“So he’s Turkish?” Laurel said in surprise.

“Most likely,” he agreed. “The Khazars were a semi-nomadic Turkic people who frequently traveled the Silk Road between China, the Middle East, and European Russia extending from the Volga-Don steppes to the eastern Crimea and the northern Caucasus. They were also multi-confessional—a mosaic of pagan, Tengrist, Jewish, Christian and Muslim worshippers—and polyethnic which would explain his appearance.”

“He’s not Asian?” Renee frowned, “I always thought he was from Tibet.”

“Nanda Parbat isn’t his original home. Ra’s is actually Caucasian in appearance, which again fits with the Khazar theory. The Khazari people are extremely diverse in appearance, from reddish hair, white skin, and blue eyes, to looking more Middle Eastern or Asian with black hair, dark eyes, and swarthy complexions.”

“So what does he look like?” Felicity asked curiously.

“He changes his appearance from time to time, but he’s tall, dark haired, with an olive complexion, and green eyes,” he told her. “Of course, as I said, he’s a master of disguise and always travels under an alias so he’s almost impossible to track down. Even without a disguise, he can easily blend into almost any populace because his precise racial mix isn’t easily pinned down. He can appear to be anything from Arabian to European by merely using some colored contacts and changing his accent slightly.”

Felicity looked at him curiously, “Why does he call himself a ‘demon’ if he hates evil so much?”

He propped his elbows on the table and took a deep breath before speaking, “It’s not that kind of demon. He chose the name ‘Ra’s al Ghul’ in order to intimidate his enemies. Ra’s al Ghul is actually the name of a cluster of three stars located in the Perseus constellation modern astronomers call
‘**Algol**’. It appears to be one star since two of them are constantly eclipsing each other with a third exerting a gravitational pull from the outside causing their orbit to be in constant flux. The Greeks called it ‘the Demon Star’ because it sits in the right eye of Medusa and ‘winks’ every seventy-two hours. In ancient Mesopotamia, where most of Ra’s belief’s seem to originate, the constellation was referred to as **Humbaba’s** eye, but it all comes out to mean the same thing.”

**“Humbaba’s Eye?”** Felicity said uncertainly. “Never heard of it.”

“It comes from the legend of Gilgamesh,” he told her. “Humbaba was an ancient monster, similar to a griffin, who was slaughtered by Gilgamesh in much the same way as Medusa was killed by Perseus. In fact, the Greeks and Romans took those myths and based their own legends off of them. Many people viewed the star as one of bad omen to the point that they would even lay down their arms and stop fighting when it was visible because they believed that it would bring great evil upon them. Ra’s used that belief as a way to intimidate his enemies but also for the spiritual aspect as well.”

“The spiritual aspect,” Renee said slowly, “of an evil star.”

His lips turned upwards at that, “Ra’s strongly identifies with that myth because, while the Greeks, the Chinese, and others thought it was a sign of bad omen, the Sumerians saw Humbaba as the bringer of gifts, wonders and auras with a strong tie to the medical arts. It also represents self-sacrifice for the betterment of others.”

“Self-sacrifice?” Laurel said arching her eyebrow at that. “The guy who leads the League of Assassins sees himself as a martyr?”

“Believe it or not, yes,” he nodded. “Ultimately Ra’s sees himself as a prophet and Algol represents the heart of a demi-god named Dumuzi who sacrificed his life to return the goddess Inanna to the Earth which is what he’s trying to do with his prophesy.”

Felicity looked at him in surprise, “Inanna?”

“She’s a Sumerian goddess of love and war, much like Venus or Aphrodite,” he told her.

“Yeah, we know,” Laurel said sharing a look with Felicity. “Actually, one of the meta-humans Felicity and I met when we were at Orbital mentioned her. Felicity started reading up on it and kind of got me hooked as well.”

“Gypsy,” Felicity supplied. “She called herself, ‘a Child of Inanna’.”

“She’s Romani?” He asked.

“Yes.”

He nodded, “Makes sense.”

“How?” Felicity asked curiously.

“The Romani, or gypsies, are another mystery unto themselves and several of Ra’s closest advisors and captains are Roma. Many people believe that given the unique ethnic mix within the Rhom that they originally descended from the Khazari as well. It would also explain why your friend referred to herself as a ‘Child of Inanna’.”

Felicity leaned in slightly, “How so?”
“The crescent and star on the Turkish flag are actually symbols of the goddess; she was both the goddess of the moon and of the planet Venus, which is the brightest star in the night sky.”

“How do you know this stuff?” Renee asked in amazement.

“I’ve been studying every and anything to do with Ra’s since before I became the Bat,” he said with a wry look. “It’s taken me to some rather odd and esoteric places in my research. Most of what I know about Ra’s early life I found out from his biography, however.”

“Ra’s has a biography written about him?” Laurel asked disbelievingly. “That explains why Ollie could never find anything on the guy; he used to hate going to the library. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever even seen him read.”

Bruce smirked at that, “Of sorts,” he told her. “A few years back I found a book, an unfinished manuscript really, by HG Wells that was written long before he became famous and that was supposedly a biography of Ra’s al Ghul.”

Felicity blinked, “The same HG Wells who wrote ‘The Time Machine’ and ‘The Island of Doctor Moreau’?”

“The same,” he agreed. “In fact, supposedly the life of Ra’s became the basis of several of his novels. This manuscript, however, was never verified as being truly written by Wells so I can’t say for sure. I do know that it was very similar to the stories both Ra’s and Talia told me.”

“So what’s his story?” Felicity asked, scooting closer.

He grinned at her, “You are the only person who can make talking about Ra’s al Ghul feel like I’m telling someone a bedtime story.”

“Maybe you can tuck me in later?” She said with a naughty look.

“Promises, promises,” he said, giving her a teasing kiss.

“Ugh, okay, enough of that,” Renee said in disgust. “I’m eating here.”

Bruce shot the other woman a look of annoyance before pulling back reluctantly. “Okay,” he sighed, “like I said, not even his own daughters know his original name; all they know is that when he first came to Egypt he was known as ‘The Physician’.”

“So he was a doctor?” Laurel asked.

“That’s how he started out anyway.” He leaned back in his chair and began to speak, “Ra’s was a member of a tribe of nomads but he left his people to study medicine with an elderly physician, possibly an Israelite living in Egypt. In exchange for him teaching Ra’s, he agreed to marry the elderly man’s daughter, Sora, because the old man was dying and he was afraid for his daughter’s safety after he was gone.”

“Sora,” Felicity repeated.

He nodded, “She was supposedly very beautiful and well educated, two things Ra’s appreciated. They fell in love and got married. According to what the manuscript said, she was truly his partner in all things including his research into a strange phenomenon known as ‘the Lazarus Pits’.”

Felicity frowned, “So he discovered the Pits before he even got there?”
“Actually, no,” he told her, “the old man did. It was one of the reasons why Ra’s wanted the old man to teach him. After the old man died, he and Sora continued to study the Pits. The physician in him wanted to basically find the cure for death and he felt that the Pits were the key to that.”

“So, wait,” Laurel said wrinkling her nose, “How did he go from a guy who treated his wife like a true partner and a doctor who wanted to save all of humanity, to someone who runs the League of Assassins?”

Bruce’s face darkened, “There was a local prince who developed an unhealthy attraction to Sora. He tried to attack her one day in the marketplace but the sultan, his father, stopped him. The prince was apparently fond of fighting and such because one day he was injured in a fight and developed a massive infection. The sultan called Ra’s in to cure him but he was beyond his help. Despite how he felt about the prince, he saw curing him as an opportunity to help his family and be named as the sultan’s private physician so he brought the prince to the Lazarus Pits.” He paused, “When the prince was revived he went into a psychotic rage and killed several of his own men then raped and strangled Sora.”

“Oh God,” Laurel said, horrified.

“Bastard,” Renee said in disgust.

“What happened afterwards?” Felicity asked. “Was he ever punished or--?”

“No,” Bruce said in low tones. “The sultan, wanting to protect his son from Ra’s allegations, blamed him for the murders instead. He sentenced him to death and his son had him buried alive in a pit with the body of his dead wife beside him.” He ran his hand down Felicity’s back soothingly as he spoke as if to take the sting out of his words, “After the sultan’s men left him for dead, a boy whose grandmother he treated found him and dug him up. Ra’s then went to his uncle, the chieftain of their tribe, and they gathered together their most fearsome fighters and launched an attack against the city. He killed the prince then the sultan, and razed the city to the ground in revenge.”

“I gotta say, I’m kind of on Ra’s side so far,” Renee admitted reluctantly.

“Me too,” Laurel agreed.

“A lot of people see Ra’s as a savior for that very reason,” Bruce told them. “In some places he’s venerated as a god which is why his followers are so dangerous; they’re all true believers who would kill or die for him. In fact, in addition to the name Ra’s al Ghul, he also adopted the aspect of a god, Bisu or Bes. He was a foreign god of African origins but worshipped within the Egyptian and Sumerian pantheons as a ‘Physician of the Gods’, as well as the enemy of all evil, and the protector of children and women in childbirth. Ra’s stylized himself after this demon-god and, as his ‘prophesy’ developed, he became more and more convinced that the gods wanted him to produce a son who would one day create a world without evil.”

“So was Dusan Sora’s son, too?” Felicity asked.

“No, although Talia claimed that she was pregnant with their first child at the time of her murder but, who knows? Nothing in any of the records I’ve found mentions they had any children together. In any case, Ra’s, in addition to hunting down and destroying evil wherever he could, began to search for the perfect woman to give him his son. As I mentioned earlier, according to his ‘vision’, the mother of his child had to be ‘touched by the gods’ in some way so she could pass on her unique gifts to their son. This is where things get a bit murky,” he warned them.

“*This* is where it gets murky?” Renee asked dubiously.
He offered her an amused look, “Finding information about Dusan is, believe it or not, even harder
than finding anything on Ra’s. All I have on Dusan are snippets of information; even Talia wasn’t
aware he was her brother until a few years ago.”

“Why not?” Laurel asked.

“Ra’s never acknowledged him,” he told her.

Felicity narrowed her eyes in confusion, “But if he wanted a son so badly…?”

“Dusan was an albino,” he told her.

“So?” She scowled.

Bruce squeezed her knee under the table comfortingly, “To Ra’s thinking, because Dusan was an
albino, his men wouldn’t follow him and therefore he couldn’t lead his army.”

“What does him being an albino have to do with his ability to lead?” Felicity asked, obviously
perturbed, then backtracked slightly, “I mean, not that leading an army of assassins is a good thing,
but still.”

“Even now, albinos are subject to a great deal of prejudice,” he told her. “In parts of Africa they’re
still murdered for their body parts because some people use them as talismans against evil and
disease.”

“That’s true,” Laurel chimed in. “There was an article on Reuters I read recently that said that in
Tanzania they believe that having sex with an albino will cure AIDS so men, women, and even
children are often raped and murdered as a result. They said that something like sixty-three people
were murdered but that the true number of victims could actually be several hundred since it’s rarely
reported to the authorities.”

“I saw that article,” Renee nodded. “They call themselves ‘Albino Hunters’ and kill their victims in
order to harvest their blood, hair, genitals and other body parts for potions they then sell to local
witch doctors because they believe that albinism is a curse. They think they’re demons so killing
them isn’t even considered murder.”

“Dusan was supposedly born hundreds of years ago, shortly after Ra’s first began his crusade, so
you can probably imagine how dangerous it was for him back then. Ra’s considered that to be a fatal
flaw and deemed it as a sign that he was unworthy of the title of ‘heir’.”

“So he just abandoned his son?” Felicity asked, still upset.

“Surprisingly enough no,” he told her. “Even though Ra’s considered him to be a failure in regards
to the prophesy, Dusan actually became his most trusted servant. He called him Al'Shabah Al-
Abyad, ‘The White Ghost’.”

“So where is he?” Laurel asked, “Where did he come from?”

“I don’t know where he is,” he admitted. “Do you remember when I told you that Ra’s planned on
placing his consciousness within Damian because he was dying?”

“That was kind of hard to forget, so yeah,” Felicity said ruefully.

“Wait, what?” Renee asked incredulously.
“Ra’s can do that?” Laurel asked in surprise.

“Apparently,” Felicity told them.

Bruce sighed, “Ra’s combines science and mysticism and is possibly as much as a thousand years old. He’s had hundreds of years to study the occult and he’s been using the Lazarus Pits for all of it. There’s no telling what he’s capable of. The problem with the Pits are that you can only use each Pit once and they aren’t easy to find. When he ran out of them, he began to die, so he intended to transfer his consciousness into Damian’s body and put his own body into stasis until he could find a Pit. When that failed to happen, Dusan offered himself as the vessel and Ra’s supposedly transferred his consciousness inside of his body instead of Damian’s.”

“So Ra’s is an albino now?” Felicity asked in surprise.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “As I said, Ra’s placed his dying body in stasis with the intentions of finding a Lazarus Pit and restoring it back to health so he could transfer out of Dusan’s shell eventually. I managed to capture Dusan and had him locked in Arkham under heavy sedation.” He looked between the three women, “I honestly don’t know if this ‘mind swap’ was successful or not. Dusan claimed to be Ra’s but, at the same time, wasn’t really acting or speaking like him so either he was crazy or faking it in order to take over the League. Ra’s servants took off with his original body however, then somehow managed to free Dusan. I don’t know what he looks like anymore; I don’t know if he’s Dusan now or if he went back to looking like himself. I do know that he hasn’t been seen or heard from in a few years so either he’s dead or in hiding but given what you told me about Miller and Mallory, I have a feeling he’s about to pop up again very soon.”

“So does Dusan just go back to being himself after he goes back into his own body?” Laurel asked curiously.

“No,” he told her with grim finality, “If he really was successful then Dusan died the moment his father completed the transfer.”

Felicity looked at him, “So he killed his own son?”

“In a way,” he admitted, “but it was Dusan’s choice to die. He sacrificed himself so his father could complete the prophesy.”

“If Dusan was considered to be so ‘unworthy’ then why did he even care about this stupid ‘prophesy’ in the first place?” Renee asked in scathing tones.

“Again, that’s where things get murky,” he told her. “In addition to being a master assassin, Dusan was a bit of a mystic as well. The only thing I know about his origins is that he came from a nomadic tribe known as ‘the Hidden Ones’, and that his mother was some sort of priestess. Ra’s supposedly chose her to become the mother of his son because of that and the fact that this tribe was very powerful and he wanted to absorb them into his army. Even though he never acknowledged him as his son, he kept him close in order to preserve his ties with Dusan’s people, many of whom would later become members of his personal guard. He even has a servant he always calls ‘Ubu’ who is a member of this tribe. It’s symbolic, the name is passed from one servant to the other, but for the most part he always chooses one of the Hidden Ones to serve as his Ubu.”

“So where does this ‘tribe’ come from?” Renee asked.

“The Ubu I’ve met in the past all speak with Romani accents so I’d say they were either gypsies or Khazari,” he told her.
“Damn,” Renee said stretching a bit, “Now I’m thinking of watching ‘My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding’ for research purposes just in case Ra’s al Ghul does show up.”

“I doubt that’ll help much,” Laurel snorted.

“Besides, I’ve seen that show and you don’t want to go there, trust me,” Felicity added.

“You watch ‘My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding’?” Renee asked her.

“Just once,” Felicity admitted. “It was late and my choices were that or a Shark Fabric Steamer infomercial.” She grimaced, “Of course, I wound up buying one anyway. I will admit that it did come in handy…until someone smashed it, that is.”

“If you want another steamer then get another steamer,” Bruce told her.

“I intend to, along with another chicken rotisserie,” she assured him.

“Okay, this was fun,” Renee said, getting up from the table to help clear off all the empty cartons while Laurel gathered everyone’s plates to load the dishwasher. “Do you need help cooking dinner, because I can hang around for a while?”

“You want to help cook dinner?” Felicity asked as she and Laurel exchanged looks.

Renee shifted her weight slightly, “Well, I could boil something or, I don’t know, chop something? You need some more scrambled eggs? Because I could--”

“No,” both she and Laurel said at the same time.

“I’ve got it,” Felicity assured her. “Weren’t you and Laurel going to check out a meeting?”

Yeah,” Laurel said, catching on. “We did miss that one this morning.”

Renee glanced at her watch, “The next one’s not for a few more hours.” She looked up, “Hey, if you want to we could head over to Wildcat’s place to check out his setup?”

“I could actually use a good workout,” Laurel admitted.

“So could I,” Felicity sighed. “I am starting to get so out of shape it’s ridiculous.”

“If you need to work up a sweat I’m sure we could figure something out,” Bruce said in a low undertone causing her to flush.

“I heard that,” Renee said in disgust. “And, on that note, I’m out of here.”

“Let me just grab my gym bag,” Laurel told her before looking to Felicity. “You sure you’ve got this? I don’t want to leave you in the lurch.”

“I’ve got it,” she assured her.

“Mind if we take the van again?”

“Take it,” she said, waving her off.

“A van?” Bruce asked as soon as the two other women left. “Alfred got you a van?”

“No, when I turned in Isabel’s car at the dealership they offered me a van instead,” she said as she
got up to fill a bowl with an ice bath for the rutabagas. 

He scowled, “I told you not to return it to the dealership!”

“And I told you I had it handled,” she told him.

“How?”

“I had Renee and the guys spray graffiti on it then created a police report before I went to the dealership,” she told him easily.

“What about the bullet holes?” He demanded.

“I told them it happened when I stopped for coffee in a bad neighborhood.”

He stared at her for several seconds in stunned disbelief, “And they bought that?”

She shrugged, “It’s Gotham.” She looked down at her tablet, “How do mini pumpkin ginger cheesecakes sound?”

“Like I’m calling Alfred,” he said pulling out his phone.

“I’m telling you, I’ve got this,” she said with a huff.

“Baby,” he said, looking at the table that was filled with bowls and bowls of both peeled and unpeeled vegetables then looked pointedly at the clock on the wall.

“Oh, okay, so maybe you should call Alfred.”

He grinned at her then dialed.

Less than forty-five minutes after calling in reinforcements, Alfred arrived along with Carousel’s sous chef and a few members of their kitchen staff. After explaining to Alfred some of the things she had planned for the menu as well as both her and J’onn’s dietary restrictions, Bruce dragged her from the kitchen to their bedroom claiming she was desperately in need of a nap.

He wasn’t lying; she was a bit tired. Of course, as soon as he got her behind closed doors all that changed.

“So what’s your name again?” Bruce asked her sometime later as he kissed her shoulder, the covers tangled all around them.

She looked up at him sleepily, “I don’t remember.”

“And the next time you want to throw a dinner party for twenty people?”

“I know, I know; call a caterer. For the record though, I could have done it by myself.”

“I’m sure you could’ve,” he agreed, rolling her onto her back as he leaned over her, “but then we wouldn’t be able to do this for the rest of the afternoon, would we?” He asked as he placed sucking kisses down her throat.

“This is because of the movie thing, isn’t it?” She asked him fuzzily as his fingers found her breast.
“Well, if Daniel Garret is going for Oscar Gold with your stand-in then I’m going for the Nobel Prize by doing it with the real thing,” he said, teasing her nipple into a hard peak.

“I don’t think they give Nobel Prizes for sex,” she told him with a gasp as his teeth tugged at her earlobe.

“They will by the time I’m done,” he promised.

“God, you’re such a competitive ass. You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you?” She groaned as he settled between her thighs once more. “You’ve already made me forget my name; what more do you want?”

He hummed as if contemplating the question, “Well, first the plan was to make you forget your name but this time I’m thinking of making you forget how to speak entirely.”

“Help,” she snickered as he began kissing his way down her throat once more.
Chapter Fifty-Eight

Chapter Notes

First off, please note the piece of artwork below. It was submitted by a very talented 13 year old reader named Germaine so please feel free to comment on her talent and lovely gift. I wish I could draw even half as well as she can. Also her DeviantArt page is here in case you would like to enjoy even more of her talent:

http://gata-art.deviantart.com/

I know it took a while but anyway you cut it this is over 150 pages in one chapter and that shitty finale threw me for a loop so it took me a minute to get my head in the game. I wrote a story about it called A Kiss to the Forehead if you want to check it out:

http://archiveofourown.org/works/2755949

Anyway, here you go. Hope I didn't screw it up (mostly because I've been writing for more than 48 hours straight) and I've added hyperlinks to some interesting comic references for you to check out. (hyperlinks are cool)

Oh, and while I personally do not celebrate this holiday (bah humbug), I wish for all of you joy both on this day and every other no matter the season.

---Jen
Chapter Fifty-Eight

Bruce looked down at her tenderly as he played idly with one of her curls, “I love seeing you like this.”

“Like what?” She asked.

“Pink from the shower and thoroughly made love to,” he smiled as his lips moved over hers once
“Sweet talker,” she hummed against his lips. “I thought you only did the romantic stuff over the phone.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, moving over her, “did it seem like I was phoning it in just now?”

“No, you were doing pretty good actually,” she grinned.

“Pretty good?” He said, taken aback, “If that was just ‘pretty good’ then I’ll just have to try harder, now won’t I?” He nipped at her earlobe and chuckled as she shivered against him.

Ever since she’d agreed to marry him on Sunday he’d been positively insatiable. The minute she’d emerged from the bathroom in a towel, he’d pulled her down on the bed and began kissing her again while smiling down at her with that same sweet, almost boyish smile that was so unlike his usual sardonic smirks and forced grins. It was as if he were celebrating their honeymoon early but, frankly, Felicity wasn’t complaining. While this newfound passion was a bit inconvenient given their time crunch, the rewards were well worth it. She was tired, but happy, and she knew from the twinkle in his eye that he was already gearing up for round four.

However, as nice as that sounded, the fact was that time was not on their side and they really did need to get out of bed soon…

“I love you,” he said, pulling back and breathing in deeply. “God, you just look so…” he smiled again and tugged on one of her curls that had wrapped itself around his finger like a vine made from spun gold.

“So what?” Felicity asked, glancing over at the clock, “So much like a tired shagged out mess who just got out of the shower and now needs to throw on some clothes before she’s late for her own dinner party?”

“Beautiful and adorable,” he lifted his head and gave her a slow grin, “and incredibly sexy. And, yes, like a woman who has been made love to many, many times today and who is about to be made love to again if I have anything to say about it.”

“Dinner party,” she reminded him as he began to kiss his way down her neck.

“Unfortunately that’s been postponed,” he said with mock seriousness.

“Really? Since when?” She asked, trying not to grin at his antics and failing miserably.

“Since,” he ran his hand down her side, testing her ribcage, “I decided that making love to you is more important than eating a defiled turkey.”

“A defiled turkey?” She snickered.

“You’re the one who said somebody shoved a chicken and a duck up its ass, not me.”

She outright laughed at that, “Not its ass, its hoo hah!”

“What’s the difference?” He asked with an answering chuckle.

“There isn’t one but it just sounds better,” she threw back.

“I stand corrected then,” he said with a little growl as he nibbled on her neck. “Besides, we still have a lot of time to make up for, remember? I’m just doing my part to right a wrong,” he said with a leer
as his hand cupped one of her breasts and squeezed as he wriggled his eyebrows comically.

“You’re ridiculous, you know that right?” She reached up to loosely wrap her arms around his naked shoulders.

“Um hmm,” he hummed against her throat as he kissed his way to her collarbone. “Not wrong though, am I? I still have four years and two days’ worth of lovemaking to catch up on. I figure that if I can manage to make love to you one thousand eight hundred and twenty-five times by the end of the year then we should be completely caught up.”

She blinked, “Really? You must have put some real thought into that,” she gasped out as his teeth pulled at her earlobe.

“Hmm, I did,” he agreed.

“Sounds a little ambitious though, don’t you think? By my calculations we’d have to make love,” she paused and did the math, “five times a day, every day, just to meet that goal.”

He lifted his head and frowned, “Not really. I thought it seemed like a pretty conservative number actually. I was going to double it but I think us having sex five times a day for the rest of the year is a bit more reasonable than ten, don’t you? After all, we do have jobs to go to.”

“Not to mention the fact that we’d have to take some time out to eat, sleep, and rehydrate,” she added.

“True,” he said, going back to kissing her neck.

“Five times a day, huh?” She mused. “You sure you can handle it? After all, you are getting up there in years.”

“Uh huh,” he said cheekily, “Well, to be honest it is a hard job,” he pressed into her so she could feel just how ‘hard’ his ‘job’ was, “but somebody has to do it. Care to rate my ‘performance’ so far?” He asked playfully.

She laughed huskily, “I’d say you’re already ahead of the curve because this sort of thing seems to be happening pretty often these days.”

Really often. Maybe it was because they’d both been celibate for a while (him a matter of months and her a little over four years before suddenly becoming popular) but she’d gone from what seemed like a never-ending dry spell to marathon bouts of sex in a matter of weeks. Thank God for modern medicine, she thought. Given her recent inability to remember to take her meds or pick up some condoms, she was so glad she decided to go on the depo shot because it was as though he were determined to get her pregnant. Without it, she was fairly certain that she’d be someone’s mommy in no time at all.

“Well, I always was an overachiever,” he said as his hand wandered over her hip to squeeze her butt through the towel.

“Overachiever is putting it mildly,” she told him. “Most men would be in a coma by now.”

Actually, I should be in a coma right now, she thought to herself. They’d made love when he got home, then twice more since he insisted she take a ‘nap’, and now he was looking to add to that number before dinner. If he decided to not go on patrol that night she might wind up with those downstairs carpet burns Barbara was joking about. As it was, she was probably going to wind up bowlegged if he was actually serious about those numbers he was tossing out.
“Comes from all the clean living not to mention the tantric yoga I learned from Sting,” he said in a
deadpan causing her to snort involuntarily, his mouth dropping to place a kiss above her heart before
peering up at her, “Seriously though, I’m just…” he sighed, dropping his chin on her chest, “I’m the
luckiest guy in the world right now and I love feeling happy for a change. It’s been a long time since
I’ve felt this good, this…content about my life, my decisions, about handing over the mission to
Dick, even if it’s only part-time.” He moved above her and kissed her mouth once again before
pulling back, his eyes casting over her features, “I haven’t been this happy since our weekend
together before you left Gotham. I can still remember the first time I woke up to you in my bed. I
just…” he smiled, “God, you were so beautiful.”

“Were?” She teased.

“Are,” he corrected, his fingers caressing her cheekbone, “You are so beautiful and you’ll be
beautiful ten years from now, twenty, fifty, and I’m the lucky son of a bitch who’ll get to see it. I’m a
lucky, lucky man.”

She smiled up at him, her own fingers softly casting over his slight stubble and the fragile skin beside
his eyes, now crinkled up from his smile, “Lucky, handsome, stubborn, a bit of an ass, somewhat of
a control freak, rude more often than not—”

“Hey, I thought we were supposed to be saying nice things about each other,” he complained lightly.

“—indomitable, brave, tender, rough,” she said quietly then frowned, “And did I mention gorgeous
already because talk about a triple scoop of yummy.”

“Triple scoop, huh?” He chuckled as he kissed and gently nibbled his way down her throat, his
fingers undoing her towel to expose her naked body to his gaze.

She hummed, “The Bat in his armor; woof! Terrifying and sexy all at the same time. The
businessman in the suits; frankly, Armani should be paying you to wear them. And, of course, Bruce
in the buff; need I say more?”

“Bruce in the buff, huh?” He repeated as he moved down to kiss her stomach, nibbling lightly at her
navel.

“Uh huh,” she said, her fingers tangling in his hair as his mouth wandered lower on her stomach.
“He’s my favorite.”

“Oh, I see,” he said in a low voice as he pulled her thighs apart so he could kiss the inside of her
knee, slowly working his way towards her center.

“Uh huh,” she mumbled again as his lips placed a sucking kiss high in her inner thigh. “Bruce?” She
asked, her fingers still carding through his own slightly damp curls.

“Hmm?” He hummed.

“We should probably get dressed now.”

“We should,” he agreed, his fingers seeking her center, “but we won’t.”

“You’re insatiable,” she gasped as his tongue began to tease her already sensitive flesh.

“Yes, I am,” he rumbled, his fingers entering her and causing her to whimper as he placed another
sucking kiss on her clit, his tongue flicking and rolling the flesh between his lips. “I guess I’m not the
only lucky person in the room, huh?” He blew a warm puff of air across the bundle of nerves then
chuckled as she shivered.

“Bruce, we really should—” She gasped loudly as he dove in, his mouth, tongue, and fingers making it impossible to catch a breath much less speak.

It took a surprisingly short time to bring her to a shivering mass of flesh given how sensitive she already was from their recent lovemaking. As she lay there clutching her pillow, Bruce chuckling smugly from between her thighs as he brought her down from her high, the thought occurred to her that she might actually become the first woman to die from having too many orgasms in a row. Seriously. If he kept this up he was going to kill her. She never thought she’d say it but, as arrogant as it sounded, she was actually on the verge of getting sick of sex. It was like that old TV show she’d caught late one night where a kid got caught smoking so his dad locked him up in a closet until he smoked an entire box of cigars. Bad 1950’s parenting and Freudian imagery aside, sex with Bruce was quickly becoming her box of cigars. As it was, she already felt a bit dehydrated; she didn’t know how much more she could take before she went into a pleasure coma.

Felicity groaned, “No more, please,” she begged him. “I swear to God, if you don’t stop I’m going to sneak saltpeter into your food to counteract whatever the hell it is that you’re on.”

“I’m on you, or didn’t you notice,” he said with a wicked grin as he kissed her lower belly.

“Please stop, I can’t take anymore,” she whined. “I just can’t.”

“Oh, I think you can,” he murmured, his tongue moving up to her navel.

“No more, please,” Felicity begged. “Sara used to say that women were the Energizer Bunnies of sex but, seriously, the batteries are dead!” She told him. “There’s nothing left! Besides, I hate to leave you high and dry here, but we really need to get dressed!”

“Sorry to tell you this, Baby,” he said as he crawled up her body to catch her lips in a teasing kiss, his hips fitting inside hers as his length found home, “but dinner is going to be a little late.”

Sure enough, a while later Felicity flew out of the bathroom, her hair in disarray as she snatched a fresh set of underwear out of the drawers and tossed them on the bed, glaring all the while at Bruce who was laying back among the rumpled sheets with a smug grin plastered on his face.

“I hate you so much right now,” she grumbled as she ran naked into the closet, her body still glistening from the quickie shower and less than thorough toweling she’d been forced into.

“That’s not what you were saying five minutes ago,” he said, rolling over onto his stomach and tilting his head in order to follow her progress through the room. “Hey Baby?”

“What?” She snapped, sticking her head out of the closet.

“You dropped something.”

She jogged back into the bedroom and looked around frantically, “What?”

“Down there on the floor,” he said, vaguely gesturing towards the armoire.

She bent down and frowned, “I don’t see anything; what was it?”

“Nothing,” he said with a naughty twinkle. “I just kind of like watching you do that.”

She growled low in her throat and snatched a silver plastic egg out of the top drawer and aimed it at
his head which he handily batted away causing the tights within it to land on the floor as the container broke open, spilling its contents, “Get dressed! They’ll be here in less than five minutes!”

“I’m telling you, these things never start on time,” he sighed as he got out of bed and pulled a fresh pair of underwear and socks from the dresser. He grimaced at the purple, pink, aqua, and lime green striped socks with the cheetah print on the toe and heel but threw them on the bed anyway.

“Just shut up and put this on,” she said rushing out of the closet and shoving a pair of jeans, a buttoned down shirt, and a jacket at him before tossing her own outfit on the bed and quickly throwing on the underwear she had randomly chosen.

“Jeans and a sport jacket?” He frowned. “What is this; freshman orientation at college?” He shook his head, “I’m going to go pick out something el—” He froze, his eyes catching sight of her.

“Go pick out whatever you want; it’s not like I care. I just grabbed something,” she said breathlessly as she adjusted the straps on the black lace push up bra that was completely sheer with the exception of the small brightly embroidered flowers over the cup in shades of purple, hot pink, and orange, and a matching pair of lacy briefs that were cut low in the front and high on the hips. “What’s wrong?” She frowned as she pulled on the tartan plaid mini skirt and zipped it on the side before slipping on the gray virgin wool sweater that went with it.

His mouth fell open slightly and he swallowed, “You’re wearing that?”

“What’s wrong with it?” She asked, looking down as she pulled her long hair from the neckline. “It’s not too Catholic school girl, is it?”

Admittedly the skirt was a bit short, but the sweater was fairly conservative with a round neckline and long sleeves. The most risqué thing about it was the fact that it was close to being a crop top, the hem riding up to expose her navel if she lifted her arms, but otherwise rested on the waistline.

“Ah…a little?” He said shifting slightly.

“It’s too late to deal with it now,” She said with an unconcerned shrug. She bent over to go through the bag holding her new slippers. “I was going to wear some tights but there is no way I have the time to deal with that now. It takes twenty minutes just to—” She heard a noise and turned to frown at him, still bent over the bag, “What?”

“Nothing,” he said clearing his throat as he continued to stare at her.

“Hurry up and get dressed, Bruce!” She scolded him before rooting through the boxes again. “I swear, Alfred has to be a saint to have put up with you for all these years,” she grumbled as she pulled out the pair of Charlotte Olympia Smart Kitty slipper flats he bought her and shoved her feet in them quickly before standing up to grab her glasses and a hair tie.

As she walked past him, already gathering her hair into a ponytail, she sighed in exasperation. He was just standing there, his eyes sweeping over her form and lingering on her bare legs. “Seriously Bruce, hurry up,” she told him, looping the band around her hair before pulling on her glasses.

As soon as they were pushed up on her nose, he moved. He lunged forward, his hand grabbing the back of her head pulling her to his lips, with his other hand going under her short skirt to cup her behind and press her close.

“What has gotten into you today?” She murmured against his lips as he pulled away slightly.

“You,” he said gruffly and kissed her again, his hand moved up then inside her underwear so his
fingers could caress the smooth flesh of her bottom. “I can’t explain it except to say it’s like I’m on fire or something,” he said sounding equally bemused even as he nibbled on her throat before brushing his lips against hers again. “I just can’t seem to get enough of you for some reason.” He squeezed her butt with both hands, one outside and one inside of her panties, then growled sexily as he nibbled at her ear.

She snickered, “You really are an ass man, you know that?”

“Like I said before,” he murmured, his hand moving out of her underwear and up where it slipped under her sweater to cup her breast, his thumb tracing the embroidery over her nipple, “I’m a fan of the whole package.”

“So the Catholic school girl look turns you on, huh?” She asked arching her back as he kissed her throat.

“Apparently,” he grinned. “Maybe later I could play headmaster and you could be the naughty student in need of a good…‘talking to’?” He teased, giving her bum another squeeze.

“Dirty old man,” she teased before pulling away from him reluctantly, “Hurry up and get dressed, you pervert. I have to go put on some lipstick real quick before people start arriving if they haven’t already.”

Sure enough, as if on cue, the phone rang once then was picked up, presumably by Alfred.

“Tha’t’s probably security,” Bruce said resentfully as he moved to put on his underwear and socks. “Have I mentioned how much I really hate this thing yet?”

“Several times,” she called out from the bathroom as she checked the cut on her lip that was pretty much gone thanks to the second dose of herbs. “Are you sure you’re okay with coming? Because you really don’t have to,” she said as she smoothed on the velvety red lipstick, enjoying the splash of color after days of nothing but medicated lip balm and light gloss. “You can just wait downstairs or go home until it’s over.”

“I’m not leaving you alone with Huntress,” he said darkly as he shoved his legs into the dark washed denim jeans and pulled on the black button down shirt she’d picked for him.

“There are going to be at least eighteen other operators there, you know,” she told him as she tightened her ponytail and headed out into the bedroom just as he finished buttoning his shirt, leaving it open at the throat, then threw on the charcoal jacket. “I thought you were going to pick out an outfit that was less ‘college freshman’?”

“Clothes are clothes,” he said dismissively as he went into the closet for some shoes. “I can tolerate being your Man-Barbie for one night if I have to.”

“You mean my ‘Ken doll’?” She asked with a smirk as she followed him.

“Whatever; besides, at least it’s comfortable,” he said as he sat down on the padded bench and pulled on some well-worn lace up boots.

“Expecting to go into battle tonight, Ken?” She asked him, nodding at the combat style boots.

“Yes, I am,” he told her, tucking in the laces. “Between Queen, your brother, and Huntress, I’m pretty sure I’m going to be brawling with somebody.”

“Oh well, so much for Friendsgiving then,” she said with a sigh. “You know, if it will help you feel
better, you can go downstairs and throw on your armor real quick.”

“You said I was being ridiculous when I suggested that earlier,” he said with a frown as he got up to join her.

“You were being ridiculous but I’d rather you be ridiculous and comfortable than have you be a complete misery all through dinner,” she said with a snort as he put his hand on her waist and brought her closer.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be a good little Man-Barbie, I promise,” he said drolly before placing a light kiss on her lips.

“Ken doll,” she reminded him again. “There is no such thing as a ‘Man-Barbie’.”

“Sure there is,” he told her. “He’s the blond Man-Barbie who kind of looks like a more intelligent version of Queen and lives in her Barbie Mansion like some kind of jobless leech.”

“First off, Oliver doesn’t look like a Ken doll and he happens to be very intelligent…” he snorted at that, “And secondly, it’s not a Barbie Mansion, it’s a Dream House. Also, I’m pretty sure Ken has a job,” she censured lightly, then paused, “Maybe. Actually, he might be her house husband or some kind of trust fund baby because all he ever seems to do is go surfing. You know, if we eventually do have a little girl, you’re going to have to be down with the lingo so you might want to bone up on it now.”

“Think I’ll need to put that much time into researching ‘Barbie World’?” He asked with a crooked smile.

She nodded with a very serious expression, “Oh yeah. Believe it or not, Barbie is a pretty big deal. After all, she’s an astronaut/International Christmas Angel who owns her own pet beauty salon and who teaches pre-school while dressed in haute couture.”

His lips twitched upwards, “You don’t say?”

“Absolutely,” she said firmly, “She has like sixty different high profile careers. That is one ambitious lady, Ken my friend.”

“I never realized you were such a Barbie aficionado,” he said with an amused expression.

“Me?” She said wide-eyed, “Oh yeah, I’m just a Barbie girl, in a Barbie world, and life in plastic is fantastic!”

“Really?” He said dubiously.

“Uh huh, feel the glamour in pink,” she breathed then kissed his chin lightly.

He squeezed her a little tighter and pulled a face, “I’m sensing a pop culture reference that I’m not really getting at the moment.”

“Nor would you unless you were up on Danish-Norwegian dance-pop one hit wonders or unfortunate enough to be within the vicinity of a radio in 1997,” she said drolly.

“Ah,” he nodded solemnly. “Not a big fan of Danish-Norwegian dance-pop and I spent most of 1997 hiking up and down a mountain in Tibet.”

“You didn’t miss much,” she told him. “Well, Men in Black came out but that was balanced by a
combination of Hansen, Celine Dion, and the birth of the Teletubbies.”

“Glad I missed it then.”

“Nanda Parbat was definitely a better choice for sure,” she assured him mockingly.

“A little girl, huh?” He said with a soft smile before kissing her again, this time lingering on her lips. “We could skip this thing and get to work on making that happen; when does that depo shot wear off again?”

“Don’t start,” she told him as she ran her hands down his chest, smoothing down the lapels of his jacket as she breathed in his spicy cologne. “We’re late enough as it is.”

“I’m serious,” he told her, his hands lightly testing her rib cage.

“About skipping dinner?” She asked wryly.

“About the shot,” he corrected gently.

“Bruce,” she said with a frown.

“I know but I figured I’d ask anyway,” he said with another teasing grin. “After all, you did surprise me by agreeing to up the wedding timeline by six months so I thought you might cave on that part, too.” He watched her carefully, “Unless you’re having second thoughts?”

“No,” she said quickly.

He gave her a probing look, “Are you sure?”

She glanced at the bedroom door where she could hear the faint murmur of voices and footsteps, “We should really get out there; our guests are already starting to arrive.”

“They can wait, this can’t,” he told her. He cupped her cheek and pressed his lips to her forehead before speaking, “You know, if you want to wait I’m fine with it.”

“Do you want to wait?” She asked.

“You know the answer to that,” he said quietly, his lips brushing hers again. “But this isn’t about me,” he told her, his eyes catching hers as he pulled back. “This is about the fact that you were in an extremely vulnerable place when you came up with this ‘secret wedding’ plan and, being the selfish prick that I am, I let you run with it.”

“So now you’re cured of being a selfish prick all of the sudden?” She asked him.

“No, I’m still a selfish prick,” he said easily. “I hate to break it to you but that’s probably never going to change; however, once you said you were mine it put things more into perspective for me.”

“When did I say that?” She teased, her arms looping around his neck loosely as she played with his hair.

His head dipped closer, “Last night, or this morning rather,” he grinned before kissing the tip of her nose, “when we were making love or don’t you remember?”

She laughed, “I could have been reciting the Declaration of Independence when that was happening and I wouldn’t remember! You have a tendency to make my brain stop functioning.”
“So now that you’re fully in charge of your faculties, are you? Mine?” He asked slowly, his lips kissing a line from her temple to her mouth.

“I’m my own person, just like you are your own person,” she murmured against his lips. “That said, I do love you, I’m in love with you, and I wasn’t lying or in denial when I told Oliver that I was committed to you. Part of me will always love him, but you’re the one I said yes to, remember?”

“I love you, too, and I am honored to be the guy who got to hear you say ‘yes’, but I won’t rush you if you aren’t ready,” he said closing his eyes and leaning his forehead against hers. “I’m stubborn, selfish, and I want what I want right now, but this is forever for me, Baby; no takesies-backies, like you said, so…”

“So?”

“So what about the ‘secret wedding’ then? Should I let the pilots know to have the jet ready after the Gala or do you just want to wait six months like your father suggested? Either way, I’m good as long as I get to have you there with me. Slade, all of that, was a pretty big deal for you and I get that. If you don’t feel ready to move on, we can just live together at the manor and wait until you do.”

This was it; her out. Probably her last one, too.

She took a moment to think about it, really think about it. Yes, it was fast and there were a million reasons not to go through with it but, for some reason, it was hard to think of any. Yes, maybe her fight with Oliver along with the stress of finally confronting what had happened to her was what prompted her decision, but now that it had been made, it was like a weight was off her shoulders. It was like, this entire time, there had been a knot in the pit of her stomach as she worried about whether or not to trust in her relationship with Bruce but, if the last few years had taught her anything, it was that life was short and it could turn on a dime. They could both be dead tomorrow or next week and she wanted to live for whatever amount of time she had left.

“I want to move on and I want to be married to you,” she told him and felt the knot unravel at last. “I’m tired of letting a ghost rule my life.”

He smiled down at her, his deep blue eyes filled with some soft emotion, “Okay, that’s good then because I want to be married to you, too.”

“Then I guess you’d better get on the ball with finding me a ring because we’re catching a jet on Saturday,” she said lightly.

He pulled her left hand from around his neck and placed a kiss on her ring finger, “Mine,” he smiled at her. “As for a ring, as long as you aren’t picky I think I can scrounge something up from the vault at the manor.” He kissed her again then nuzzled her cheek with his nose, “And since I’m pressing my luck here; kids? Are we upping the timeline there, too?”

“I’m…not sure about that yet.” She pulled away, her brow furrowing slightly.

“Baby, I’m not worried about you hurting our kids,” he assured her. “Honestly, I think you’ll find that now that you’ve talked about it, the dreams aren’t going to be nearly as bad as they have been.”

“Did talking about it help you?” She asked.

He took a deep breath, “You’re actually the only person I’ve ever really told about the experiences I had when I was…wherever the hell the Omega Device sent me,” he said with a grimace.

“Really?” She asked in concern.
He gave her another soft smile, “Yeah, well, you’re not the only person who feared for their sanity after all that. However, over the years I’ve learned to work through a lot of those issues by keeping a detailed mission log and channeling my frustration through physical activity. It might not be the most healthy way of dealing with it but it’s better than keeping it all bottled up and it allows me to go back later and look at it calmly and logically.”

“So I should just put on tight leather and a mask then buy a diary?” She asked roundedly.

“Couldn’t hurt,” he shrugged, his hand cupping her butt again. “I’d kind of be interested in seeing you in leather actually.”

“Perv,” she snorted then took a moment to think about it. “Okay, look; the depo shot lasts three months and, from what the doctor told me, can linger in my system for up to six months or more after that, but three is the norm especially since this is my first time using it.” She took a deep centering breath before speaking again, “Let’s…let’s revisit it in three months and then we’ll decide together if I should go back for another shot, okay? I mean, as long as it’s in my system we can’t really do anything about it anyway and I’d still like to settle in a little before we put that kind of pressure on ourselves.”

“I can live with that,” he agreed.

“But, even if we do decide in three months try for a baby, before I come off of birth control, I still want to have genetic testing done,” she warned him. “I would love our child no matter what disabilities they came with but I don’t want him or her to have to suffer if we can prevent it. Besides, I’d kind of like to know for sure where it is I came from even if all I ever get to see is a genetic profile.”

“I agree,” he said easily. “I’ll pull Alfred aside before he leaves and have him schedule us an appointment. I don’t have any meetings scheduled tomorrow and my private physician can probably fit us in for a full work up. I can have the lab at Wayne BioTech rush the samples and, if there’s a problem on my end, we’ll consult with a specialist on what our options are; IVF, genetic sequencing, or, just to be on the safe side, a vasectomy.”

“You’d do that?” She said in surprise.

“I’ve seen what the pits can do,” he reminded her. “They twist things and can create monsters, rob people of their souls; I also know for a fact that the waters can affect people on a cellular level so, even though I was tested right after that, it wouldn’t hurt to make sure. Like you said, I wouldn’t want our child to suffer if we could prevent it and I’d love any child, even if it wasn’t biologically mine, as long as he or she was ours. And, when you’re ready, we can also check in with the social workers at the Foundation about adoption since I know that you definitely want to go that route as well.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she said, her lips curving into a smile.

“Sounds like a plan,” he rumbled before catching her lips in another lingering kiss.

There was a loud banging at their bedroom door as Tam’s voice filtered through, “Are you guys going to join us sometime tonight, or what?” She asked huffily.

“I’m coming!” Felicity yelled out.

“TMI!” Her sister shouted back. “Just get yourself and your asshole fiancé out here already!”

“I take it Tam’s still angry about the other day,” he said, his lips tightening into a rueful grimace.
“You think?” She asked smartly.

He pulled away and carded his fingers through his dark hair with a sigh, “I’m sorry but I needed to find you and she was keeping vital information from me. You’d think she’d have gotten over it by now.”

“Right, because Tam isn’t the type to hold grudges,” she said solemnly.

“Hey, I might not be polite when I’m doing what I need to do but I get results,” he told her. “If anyone here has the right to be mad about all this Orbital bullshit, it’s me. She and the rest of your little minions should be the ones apologizing for giving me the runaround, not the other way around.”

“Interesting theory,” she said pursing her lips. “Let’s see; what other ‘minions’ of mine have you pissed off this week that should just ‘get over it’? Oliver, Luke, Tam, of course, Laurel…” She looked at him, “You do realize that when people refer to you as an asshole that it isn’t meant to be a term of affection, right?”

He shrugged noncommittally, “Like I said, I get the job done.”

“Well, tonight we are not on the job,” she said firmly. “I’m not expecting miracles here, but *try* to be nice. I’ll settle for mildly offensive, but at least try not to piss anyone off to the point that they start throwing steak knives at one another.”

“Even Huntress?” He asked grudgingly.

“Okay, well, let’s not go to extremes here,” she said wryly. “Huntress, okay, be as rude as you want to be with her…short of physically knocking her over the head, of course; everyone else though, try to keep it in check. No getting into a fist fight with Oliver or Luke while passing the gravy, no more snarky legalese with Laurel, keep it down to a dull roar with Tam, make the attempt not to go all Bat Fam telenovela with Dick, keep your, um, ‘dry wit’ in check with the rest of the stragglers and strangers, and please, for the love of God, don’t pick a fight with Sara, okay? She’s a former assassin and I don’t want to be a widow before I’m even a bride.”

“I doubt that would happen,” he said confidently. “Even if I did piss her off, I’m pretty sure I could take her.”

“She does what you do only in high heeled boots and a corset,” she threw back. “You are so outclassed when it comes to her it isn’t even funny.”

“Fine,” he said reluctantly. “I’ll be on my best behavior at dinner. I’ll be polite, pleasant, and as ‘inoffensive’ as possible.”

She arched an eyebrow at that, “Like I said, I’m not expecting miracles here; I’ll simply settle for the ‘asshole lite’ version of the Bat.”

“Hilarious,” he said flatly before leading her out of the room.

“Smile, Bruce; it’s Friendsgiving,” she told him.

“Looking forward to it.” He gave her a fake grin and shut the door behind them.
When they walked into the hallway leading to the living room the first person she saw was Sara who was hugging Laurel and grinning from ear to ear while Tam stopped midsentence to look at them with an annoyed expression.

“Hey, Cutie,” Sara said brightly as she jogged up to her and enfolded her in a warm hug, ignoring a tense Bruce for the moment.

Felicity closed her eyes and relaxed into the other woman’s warmth, breathing in the smell that was Sara; the bite of cold wind, the warm citrus scent of her shampoo, and the smell of leather and gun oil, along with the faint scents of cinnamon and cedar from the lining of the suitcases Tam had given her. Mostly though she just enjoyed the feeling of the other woman’s arms around her.

Sara’s hugs were one of her favorite things in the entire world, second only to Tam’s. One would think that a hug from a woman as fit and hard muscled as Sara would be uncomfortable, but it wasn’t. It was like her bones melted when she hugged you and you merged with the joy that was Sara. Her fingers tightened around her, sinking into the soft cashmere of the off-the-shoulder ivory sweater that she had given her a while back and smiled as Sara’s strawberry blonde waves tickled her nose.

“I’m so glad you’re home and in one piece. I missed you so much,” she said sincerely.

“I missed you, too,” Sara said pulling back and Felicity could count the faint smattering of freckles that kissed her skin. Her pale blue eyes danced warmly over her face as well before turning her attention to Bruce with an arched eyebrow, “Wow, so I take it that this is the hottie who managed to dethrone Ollie Queen in the cookie eating department, huh? Nice.” Her grin widened as her eyes took in every inch of him from head to toe and back again, “You sure you don’t want to share?”

Felicity’s cheeks flushed crimson and she groaned as Bruce’s eyebrows rose in surprise, his lips curving upwards slightly.

“Thanks for that,” she told the other woman dryly.

She winked at her flirtatiously before extending her hand towards Bruce, “Sara Lance, aka The Canary. I’ve heard good things. Many, *many* good things,” she said tossing Felicity another wink.

“Oh you have, have you?” Bruce drawled, shooting Felicity a smug look. “Bruce Wayne. So what exactly have you heard about me?”

“Please don’t,” Felicity muttered.

“Well, you know how it is when us girls get together,” she said lightly. Sara’s eyes twinkled as she took in his appearance again. She turned to Felicity with a pouty expression, “Please? I’ll give him back as soon as I’m done. You can even join in. I happen to be a *great* multitasker. A *really* great multitasker,” she said giving Bruce another once over.

“No,” she told her, “Luke is coming over later; go play with him.”

“But I already played with that toy already and this one is so new and shiny looking,” she said with a mock pout. “Please? For the sake of science if nothing else; I can be the control group. First I’ll do you, then I’ll do him, then we can all do each other and compare notes.”

“I *really* like your sister,” Renee said to Laurel as she leered slightly in the other woman’s direction.
“Oh my God,” Laurel muttered. “There are days when I seriously wish I could say I was adopted.”

“No, bad Canary!” Felicity scolded. “Go find your own Cookie Monster, this one’s mine.”

She stuck her tongue out at her, “Party pooper.”

Bruce threw her an amused look and Felicity rolled her eyes at him, “Knock it off.”

“I didn’t say anything,” he told her.

“Well, *I* have something to say, and that’s that it’s about time you two stopped sexing each other up long enough to actually join the party!” Tam sniffed resentfully as she moved to stand beside Sara, all the while eyeing Bruce like she would a knock-off Louis Vuitton handbag.

“Knock it off, Tam; this is supposed to be Friendsgiving, remember?” Felicity reminded her.

“Fine.” she said shortly before turning back towards Bruce. “Although *he* still owes me an apology.”

Felicity opened her mouth to speak but Bruce, much to her surprise, beat her to it.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a clear and seemingly genuine tone. “You’re right, I was way out of line the other day, but my only excuse was that I was worried about Felicity; I apologize.”

All of the women, including Felicity, gaped at him in shocked silence before Sara looked to her sister with a slight upturn of her lips, “Granted, I only just met him, but he doesn’t seem like that much of an asshole to me.”

Laurel flushed slightly as Renee snorted, “Give him time,” the other woman promised, not even bothering to hide her amusement.

Bruce, choosing to ignore that for the moment, stepped forward and held out his hand to a still gaping Tam, “I’d really like to start over if we could,” He paused, “Especially since we’re going to be family soon and that means we’re basically stuck with each other anyway whether we like it or not.”

“And he’s back,” Renee said wryly.

“Yeah, well, that’s probably the closest he’s ever going to get to being a regular human being so…” she threw Felicity a reluctant look before sighing and taking his hand. “Fine; you’re forgiven.”

“Thank you,” he nodded, releasing her hand and moving back to Felicity’s side to place his hand on her lower back.

Tam then fixed him with a hard eye, “Of course, if you ever try to push me around like that ever again then, you should know, the Joker’s got nothing on me when I get good and pissed off,” she said flatly. “Trust me, buddy; they’ll be picking up little pieces of Bat for days and I won’t feel the slightest bit guilty about it because, frankly, Felicity looks fabulous in black.”

“It is very slimming,” Laurel intoned causing Renee to begin snickering once more.

“Exactly!” Tam said with a nod as she continued to eyeball Bruce. “She could so rock some widow’s weeds, let me tell you!”

“Oh.” At that, Bruce looked to her in confusion, but she, deciding that this was an important life lesson since her sister and Bruce were, in fact, going to be stuck together for the rest of their lives,
especially since she had no intentions of playing the role of middleman for the next fifty years or so) gave him a look that said, ‘you made this mess; now clean it up’.

He sighed and grimaced before nodding, “Duly noted.”

“Okay then,” Tam said in a much perkier tone before turning to Felicity, “I’m just going to head into the kitchen and finish setting up the table, but let me know how it turns out.”

“How what turns out?” Felicity asked in confusion.

“Wait, why are we eating in the kitchen?” Bruce asked with a frown. “I told Felicity we could have it in the formal dining room.”

“You can’t have Friendsgiving in the formal dining room,” Tam said taken aback.

Bruce gave Felicity another look before sighing, “But there’s not enough room at the kitchen table,” he said slowly. “Not for twenty or so people.”

“I brought a folding table and a bunch of table cloths so we can stick it on the end, and if we run out of room a few people can sit at the bar,” she said dismissively before heading off. “Remember; I want details!”

“Details? Details about what?” Felicity asked again.

“How is a card table in the kitchen better than the formal dining room?” Bruce asked with equal consternation. “It’s a perfectly good dining room.”

“Just--,” she sighed, “It’s Tam; trust me when I say it’s best not to question it,” she told him before turning back to Sara, “So did anything happen on your way home?”

“A few things,” she said evasively. “By the way, hope you don’t mind but we might be having a few houseguests.”

“Please tell me it’s not Huntress,” Bruce growled, the (semi) polite host going Bat at the very thought as the other’s led them out of the hall and into the living room.

“Nope,” Helena said, leaning against the wall as they turned the corner, “Although these are pretty nice digs.” Her cool eyes swept up and down his appearance before smirking, “Gotta say, you look better in the armor.”

Fantastic.

“Helena…” Felicity said warningly.

“She knows who I am?” Bruce said carefully as he turned his gaze towards Felicity.

“I didn’t say anything,” Felicity told him.

“Neither did I,” Sara said looking at Helena grimly.

“Please, like it was that hard to figure out?” Helena said offhandedly as she pushed off from the wall. “You’re not the first billionaire vigilante I’ve tussled with on a rooftop.” She smirked as she looked between Sara, Laurel, and Felicity. “Then again, in this crowd that’s not saying much. We’ve got an incestuous little group dynamic going here, don’t you think? The songbirds, the sister, me?” She asked, gesturing between all of them, “I mean, are we supposed to start passing this one around the group next because, while I’m with Tweety on the man-candy part, I think his personality and sense
of humor could definitely use some work.”

“Sorry I don’t meet your exacting standards,” Bruce bit out.

“Plus, I don’t really want him,” Laurel said dryly as Renee, once again, had to bite her lip in order not to laugh out loud.

“Oh, that’s okay,” Huntress told him with a little pout. “I can just gag you or something…unless, of course, you aren’t really sorry and that was sarcasm?” She said wide-eyed. “In which case, wow! Charm *and* wit!”

“Helena,” Sara said tightly as she noted Bruce’s quickly waning patience was reaching critical levels, “don’t you have somewhere else to be right now?”

“Probably,” she said bobbing her head slowly, “but first I want to see how these two are going to react to the souvenirs you brought back from Russia.” Her voice dropped into a mock-whisper as she cupped her hand over her mouth and leaned towards Bruce in what could only be called a foolhardy move, “You’re gonna *love* them; I know I did the entire *long* plane ride back to the States.”

“What is she talking about?” Bruce asked, looking back towards Sara, his eyes going flinty and cold.

Sara crossed her arms over her chest and looked towards the ceiling for a moment before clearing her throat, “Well, you know how we all thought there was something fishy about this whole mission set up?”

“Fishy,” Helena muttered, “That’s one word for it. ‘Trap’ would be an even better one.”

“Trap?” Bruce ground out. “What trap?”

“Yeah?” Felicity asked, avoiding his question for the moment.

“Well…”

“Ooh, are you about to tell them?” Lyla asked coming forward along with Gypsy and Katana. “This is gonna be good. You’re gonna love this,” she promised Bruce and Felicity with a huge grin.

“What the hell is going on and who are you?” He asked in a dangerous timbre as he looked between Gypsy and Lyla.

“Told you he was a barrel of laughs,” Helena said dryly, ignoring the warning looks both Bruce and Felicity were giving her as Renee’s grin broadened.

“Hi, I’m Lyla Michaels,” she said introducing herself with a handshake that he reluctantly accepted, “Also known as Lady Blackhawk, and this is Gypsy.”

“Hi,” Gypsy said staring at him wide-eyed. “Wow, so you’re Batman?”

Bruce looked at her sharply then turned his gaze back to Felicity, “Did you send out a memo to your entire team or something?”

“No!” She said, looking between the women in front of her with a mixture of frustration and confusion as well. “How--?” She began to ask Sara.

“Don’t look at me, little bird,” Sara told her. “Like I said; not it.”

“Sara didn’t reveal your identity, nor did I,” Katana assured them. “Durlin did after we told him we
were taking him to Gotham.”

“Durlin?” Felicity goggled. “You mean--?”

“Savant,” Bruce said in a low growl just as a tall, fair-haired man rose from one of the couches to join them.

“Cheers Bruce,” he said with an easy-going smile as he looked at him. “It’s been a while…or has it?” He asked with a frown. “Sometimes things tend to get jumbled up.” He glanced at his very expensive Jaeger-LeCoultre watch to check the date and time. “Huh, I think I’m due for another—ah!” He smiled just as a huge man carrying a tray ladened down with a ceramic tea service and finger sandwiches emerged from the kitchen wearing one of the aprons Wildcat purchased that said ‘Kiss the Cook’, with Alfred trailing closely behind. “Excellent,” he said clapping his hands in front of him.

“It is time for your medicine, Mr. Savant,” the very large redheaded mountain said in a thick Russian accent. “I bring it to you with tea and cucumber sandwiches so you don’t get a bad stomach.” He looked over all of them and inclined his head slightly, “Hello, I am Aleksandr Creote. Thank you both for inviting us into your lovely home.”

“What?” Bruce hissed, his expression darkening instantly. “What are they doing here?” He growled.

“Where else were we supposed to take them?” Gypsy shrugged.

“Yeah, we bagged ‘em,” Helena said off-handedly, “the least you could do is clean and cook ‘em for us. After all, Blondie here is the boss.”

Now she decides to respect my authority, Felicity thought resentfully.

“Where--?” His mouth tightened to a grim line and he looked to her, “This is *your* team.”

“And? What do you want me to do about it?” Felicity asked him. He gave her another foul look and she sighed before slowly turning to stare at her (supposedly) best friend with more than a hint of annoyance. “Now, I know you know how to get ahold of a burner phone, so is there a reason why you didn’t call to tell me about this sooner instead of just showing up at a dinner party with those two in tow? Because, I gotta tell you, if you were this determined to get me a souvenir, I would have much preferred a collectable shot glass or a postcard that said ‘Welcome to Siberia’.”

“I didn’t want to spoil the surprise?” Sara offered.

“Good answer,” Renee nodded in approval.

“Great,” Felicity muttered.

Felicity sat next to Bruce on the couch while they both stared at the group in front of them in a mixture of irritation and outright anger. Savant was munching on a finger sandwich as Creote sipped his tea beside him.

“This tea is quite lovely,” the large Russian said turning his head towards Alfred. “What is the blend, if I may ask?”

“I’m not sure,” Alfred mused as he sipped at his own cup, “Although it is quite good, I must say. Miss Felicity’s grandmother gave it to me, but I believe it’s a mixture of Oolong, Ginseng, and
“Nilgiri.”

“I concur with both your assessment of the quality of the blend as well as the ingredients,” Savant said in an accent that, like the older gentleman, marked him as the epitome of British refinement. “The fruitiness of the Nilgiri sets off the smokiness of the Oolong wonderfully. Also, if I’m not mistaken,” he sniffed the cup delicately, “Ah, just a hint of jasmine as well as notes of cassia.” He looked at Felicity, “I’m assuming your grandmother spent a good deal of time in either Kaifeng or Beijing?”

“She’s from Kaifeng, actually,” she said with a hint of surprise, “How did you--?”

“It was fairly obvious that the person who blended this tea had a refined palate and both cassia and Nilgiri are--,” he began.

“If we’re all done discussing tea, could someone please tell me what the hell is going on?” Bruce growled.

“No need to be rude, Bruce,” Savant grimaced. “Oh, and by the way, sorry about spilling the beans in regards to your ‘secret identity’,” he said with air quotes. “Not that anyone with half a brain couldn’t figure it out on their own. Speaking of people with half a brain, where’s Oracle? I do so enjoy our witty banter. She’s the only person on your little ‘team’ who had even a shred of intelligence…not that she was nearly as intelligent as I am, but--”

“Mr. Savant, you are being rude to our hosts,” the large Russian scolded gently.

“Pardon, old boy,” he said, offering Bruce an insincere smile. “Jet lag makes me a bit snippy sometimes.”

A muscle in Bruce’s jaw began to tic and Felicity laid a comforting hand on his knee before focusing her attention on Sara, “So I take it that you guys were the ones who took out the drones during the op?”

“Uh huh,” Sara nodded as she sipped from her own cup with a smirk.

“It was obvious that Miranda wanted something from him so we decided that if we were going to get to the bottom of what was going on at Orbital that it would be best to find out what that was exactly,” Katana said as she placed her cup and saucer on the table beside her.

“Yeah, and I only wish you guys had clued the rest of us in on your little plan beforehand,” Helena said testily. “Would have been nice to know what the hell was going on *before* being trapped in the middle of a fucking minefield. You’re just lucky Esmerelda here didn’t lose her shit, otherwise we all could’ve wound up as chum for whatever the fuck kind of Mongolian fish they had swimming in that lake, know what I mean?”

“We *were* all in on the plan; Gypsy included,” Sara told the other woman with a forced grin. “We just left you out of the loop because we weren’t sure which side of the fence *you* were on.”

“Well, now you know, don’t you?” Helena said with an equally stiff smile.

“Do we?” Bruce asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

“‘We’?” Huntress scoffed. “No, ‘we’ don’t,” she said gesturing between the two of them. “But ‘we’,” she then swept her hand through the air to indicate the rest of her team, “do.” She turned back towards Sara with a defiant lift of her eyebrow then looked to Felicity, “Or have you already forgotten how I had your back out there or how I followed *your* orders even though I was fairly
certain you were going to get us killed with that half-assed on the fly plan of yours?”

“It wasn’t that half-assed,” Felicity objected with a frown. “I thought hacking a drone remotely and completely reprogramming it in under five minutes to become a mine detector was pretty damn cool actually.” She looked at Bruce, “That reminds me, you should really talk to somebody over at Amaterasu about beefing up the firewalls on their mini-drone’s programming because that was just way too easy even for me.”

“What?” Bruce looked at her with a scowl, “Are you saying you hacked one of--?”

She waved him off, “I’ll tell you about it later, the point is that Helena *did* follow orders,” she paused, “even though she bitched and moaned about it the entire time.”

“Excuse me for being a little reluctant to enter into a minefield in the middle of a fucking firefight with a rookie who was shaking like a leaf while you were hacking mini-drones and shooting from the hip,” the other woman told her. “Even so, the point is that I did my job out there and had everybody’s back so I’d appreciate a little recognition for that because, if you ask me, I earned it! I mean, is a little trust too much to ask for here?” She challenged them. “Not a lot, but just enough so that if this ever happens again, someone will clue me in on what’s happening so I don’t wind up getting my ass shot full of holes or blown all to hell and back!”

“Well, you did hold a crossbow to Felicity's neck twice and take me hostage once,” Laurel pointed out.

Helena rounded on her, “Yeah, but I didn’t actually shoot any of you and I certainly didn’t shove you into a minefield then scare the ever living shit out of you by blowing up a fucking drone five inches from your head!”

“It was more like five, six feet from your head at least,” Sara scoffed then at Helena’s stern expression relented, “Okay, I’m sorry, you’re right; next time we’ll make sure you know the plan first, happy?”

“Happy’s pushing it but I can deal,” she grumbled then looked to Felicity. “What about you, boss lady? Are you going to continue leaving me in the dark with this shit or haven’t I earned full membership privileges according to you yet?”

“First off, *I* wasn’t in on the plan either, remember?” Felicity told her. “Secondly, if I had been in on the plan I would have had Sara brief you before you even got there whether I thought you had earned ‘membership privileges’ yet or not.”

“Really?” Helena asked doubtfully.

“Really,” Felicity said, ignoring the look Bruce was giving her. “As far as I’m concerned, we left our personal issues back in the ring the other day but, even if we hadn’t, I would never send anyone into a situation like that without them knowing all the pertinent facts. Even if I couldn’t care less about what happened to you, I would never risk the lives of the other members of my team by not making absolutely sure all of you were on the same page and acting as a unit. That situation could have gone down in a dozen different ways, none of them good, so yeah; as long as you have my team’s back, I have yours, understood?”

“Understood,” Helena said, somewhat mollified.

Sara nodded, her features softening slightly, “I hate to admit it but, Felicity’s right; I probably should have told you the plan.”
Her scowl deepened, “Probably?”

“Fine, I should have told you the plan,” Sara said throwing her hands up in exasperation.

“Thank you,” she said, lifting her chin slightly. “I appreciate that.”

“Unbelievable,” Bruce grumbled.

“You’re welcome,” Sara said easily. “And, for the record, you really did pull your own weight out there so if you want to stay on the team I wouldn’t have a problem with it as long as you don’t go all psycho on us again.”

“Pulled my own weight?” Helena snorted, “Bullshit, Tweety; I smoked your ass and you know it.”

“I don’t think so,” Sara smirked, “*I* had way more hits than you did. In fact, the only reason I even said it was a tie was to make up for the fact that we didn’t clue you in on the plan. However, if you really want to do dishes that bad…?”

Bruce’s brow furrowed and he looked between them then to Felicity in consternation, “Dishes? What the hell are they talking about?”

She sighed “Inside joke.”

“I hate your team,” Bruce told Felicity under his breath. “And not just Helena; I have a feeling that I’m going to wind up hating all of them before long if this is the way you people do things.”

“Yeah, well, that’s not entirely unexpected,” she returned before turning her attention to Helena, “So it’s official; you’re a Bird now?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. I mean, I’m pretty much out of targets since everyone on my dad’s old crew is either dead or in jail so I might as well do something useful with all of my free time.”

Bruce’s lips tightened and he eyed her in a less than friendly way but managed, somehow, to hold his tongue at that.

“Oh cool, so we’re really keeping the name?” Gypsy grinned. “Awesome.”

“Point of order; let the record show that I came up with the whole Birds of Prey thing,” Lyla pointed out smugly.

“Uh, no; that was me,” Sara said with a huff. “I definitely came up with the name first.”

“Actually, I’m fairly certain it was Felicity, but I could be wrong,” Katana broke in with a slight frown.

“I’m with her; it was definitely Felicity’s idea,” Laurel offered. “Although I came up with the ‘Birds of Prey Forever’ thing.”

“That would make an awesome tat,” Gypsy said with a bright grin.

“I said the same thing,” Renee agreed. “Plus, me and Laurel thought about starting a Birds of Prey softball team.”

“Softball?” Bruce said flatly as he looked towards Felicity. “You’re running a bunch of masks whose idea of formulating a mission plan is starting their own softball team?”
“It’s a legitimate team bonding exercise, what do you want from me?” She asked him helplessly. “Chances are we’ll have plenty of time to catch criminals and stuff in between games.”

“And I suppose that my team should run out and buy some jerseys so it can be the Bats against the Birds,” he growled.

“You could if you wanted to,” she told him blithely.

“We could probably get Team Flash in on it, too, now that I think about it,” Laurel mused.

“Oh, we’d so smoke all of their asses,” Lyla said confidently.

“Birds of Prey Forever, baby!” Renee said giving the other woman a high five.

“I was being sarcastic,” Bruce seethed.

“Still a pretty good idea,” Renee pointed out.

He breathed out slowly as he looked on at their antics, jaw clenched, “I’m not happy about any of this,” he told Felicity.

“Believe me, I got that,” she told him as she sipped her tea.

“This isn’t how I run my team and I’d hope it’s not how the Arrow runs his,” he pointed out. “I certainly don’t go having ‘Kumbaya’ bonding moments with psychopaths who tried to kill me on more than one occasion then invite them into the Batcave!”

“He really calls his Lair the ‘Batcave’?” Lyla whispered to Laurel with a frown.

The other woman shrugged, “Apparently.”

“Lair,” Renee said shaking her head. “That shit never gets old.”

“Well, to be fair, it’s my team, not yours or the Arrow’s,” Felicity said easily. “And on my team we apparently play softball but, since it also means we brood less than you do, maybe you guys *should* think about having a couple of jerseys made up. You could even get them to silk screen some bats on them or something.”

Bruce glowered at that while Savant merely chuckled, “Oh, this is positively hilarious. Do be sure to invite me to your first game, won’t you?”

“And if he says one more word I’m throwing both him and the Russian from the goddamn roof,” Bruce growled as he leveled a threatening finger in the other man’s direction causing Creote to straighten in his chair and look at him sharply.

“As I said, ‘buzzkill’.” Savant rolled his eyes and sighed, “Now I wish I’d just stayed back in Siberia with the assassins and the smelly fishermen.”

“All I wanted was a nice dinner with friends,” Felicity muttered, “but noooo! It’s like the friggin’ first date curse includes basically any kind of festive activity.”

“Not to harp on it, but I could’ve sworn I came up with the name first,” Sara said with a frown.

“Bullshit!” Helena scoffed. “*I* came up with it. Tell ‘em boss,” she said finally turning to Felicity.

“Helena’s right; she came up with the name,” Felicity said, rubbing the bridge of her nose wearily.
“Told you,” the other woman said offering Sara a triumphant look.

“By all means, validate the woman who recently tried to kill you by letting her name your team,” Bruce said under his breath from beside her. “Maybe she can help design your jerseys, too. She could silk screen little crossbows and dead mobsters on the back!”

She threw him a dirty look then sighed as she turned to Helena, “So are you on our team or not because I need an answer and ‘maybe’ doesn’t cut it for me,” Felicity told her. “And by ‘on the team’, that means we work as a unit,” she stressed. “No going on murderous rampages, no going off on your own, period. And, if you do go off the reservation there will be no second chances with us,” she told her with a hard look.

“Is this the same ‘fire me with extreme prejudice’ speech you gave me in the ring the other day?” She asked with a smirk. “I thought the Bat didn’t kill?”

“I’m not the Bat,” Felicity told her despite the waves of anger and frustration she could feel coming off of Bruce. Still, she added, “But on this team we avoid that kind of thing so, no; I probably won’t kill you, I’ll just make you wish you were dead.”

“I like her,” Savant said to Creote. “She’s feisty.”

She ignored that as well.

“Let me put this in terms you can understand, Helena: Cross me and you become prey,” she said in as cold and serious a tone as she could muster and, considering that this was the woman who had held a crossbow on her twice, it wasn’t hard, “If working as a cohesive unit under my direction doesn’t work for you, there’s the door. As far as I’m concerned you’ve earned enough goodwill here to warrant one free pass and that means we let you go right now without consequences, but don’t ever darken our doorstep again because this is a one-time offer,” she emphasized. “If you want in, we work as a team and you get a clean slate; your choice.”

“If I agree to join, does that mean I have to take orders from him, too?” Helena asked, thrusting her chin towards Bruce.

“Yes,” he bit out.

“No,” Felicity gave him a warning look before turning to Helena, “We’ll be working with the Bat and his team occasionally along with Team Arrow, but you’ll take your orders directly from me and me alone.” Bruce shifted uncomfortably beside her once again but thankfully managed to keep his cool, if only barely.

Oh yeah, there would be yelling later.

So much for a nice get together with friends.

Helena crossed her arms over her chest and smirked, “You sure? Because Bruce the Bat here seems to think he’s the one running this show.”

“He’s not,” she told her and Bruce shot her a narrowed look. Felicity turned to him, “The Bats and the Birds are completely separate in terms of our individual missions just like The Arrow has his team and we have ours.” She emphasized, both for his benefit as well as her own team’s.

She knew Bruce well enough to know that, despite his agreeing to all of her terms earlier, what sounded good in theory often took unexpected turns when put into practice and control would always be an issue with him, especially when it came to sharing his territory. While she knew Bruce
believed in her abilities as a handler and mission tech, Helena was a wildcard. Having her on her team, him knowing their history and knowing she’d have to keep her close, was raising his hackles big time, but this was her team and if she was really going to do this then she had to stay strong and make sure he knew that, in this one area, there would be no compromises. Either he meant it when he said he could accept her having a mission of her own or he didn’t. That made this his first real test as well as Helena’s and Felicity hoped he’d pass it but she was also prepared for if he didn’t.

She looked at him and held his gaze, letting him know without words that this was it. She’d had to take a hard line with Oliver the night before, told him that if he crossed her that she was done. With Bruce she knew she didn’t have to say the words then and there, because she’d already said them to him time and time again.

She watched as his jaw firmed and he made his decision, albeit unhappily, by giving her a slight but jerky nod.

She took a centering breath then continued, “However, I had a discussion with Arrow and with Bruce separately about the idea of forming a permanent alliance and, when he gets here, we can discuss it as a group just to make sure all of us are on the same page.”

“No need to use handles around us, darling,” Savant broke in smoothly. “I’m quite aware of the fact that Oliver Queen is this ‘Arrow’ character.”

They all looked at Durlin before Felicity narrowed her eyes at him, “And how do you know that?”

“Information is my business,” he said off-handedly. “There’s very little I don’t know.”

Tam finally emerged from the kitchen and wandered over to sit next to Sara, “What did I miss?” She asked.

Renee turned to her with an ironic twist of her lips, “Just the official plans for the ‘Birds of Prey’, Felicity politely threatening Helena with a fate worse than death, and the fact that Draco here knows Oliver is the Arrow.”

“Basically just business as usual,” Sara said wryly.

“Oh, good, so I didn’t miss anything then,” Tam nodded.

“Fine, whatever,” she sighed, “Like I said, we discussed the idea of forming a kind of partnership where we could trade team members back and forth while maintaining our separate missions.”

“Wait, is this that Justice League thing we were joking about?” Tam asked excitedly.

“Seriously?” Sara grinned.

“Well, you guys said it was a good idea and both Oliver,” she tossed Savant a dirty look, “and Bruce agreed.”

“You got Ollie and Bruce to agree on something?” Laurel asked dubiously.

“I told you, the girl is some kind of miracle worker,” Renee said dryly.

“What exactly is this ‘Justice League’?” Tatsu asked curiously.

“Should we be discussing this in front of Savant and his…” Bruce cut his eyes towards Creote, “nursemaid?”
Savant shot him a look of annoyance and started to say something but Felicity intervened, “Bruce, don’t be rude.”

“Don’t be ‘rude’?” He asked her, his already stormy expression darkening even further.

Her lips thinned, “Yes, you promised you’d be nice to our guests, remember?”

As pompous as she found Savant to be, she also could tell the man got off on playing cat and mouse and there was no way she was giving in to his little jibes and mind games.

“They aren’t ‘guests’,” he spat out. “They’re criminals.”

“It is quite alright, Mrs. Felicity,” Creote said in an almost impossibly deep bass. “I am a nursemaid to Mr. Savant. Of course, I am also his bodyguard,” he turned his dark, almost black eyes towards Bruce, “As such, I keep him safe from harm; both physical and emotional. Mr. Savant is a highly creative and sensitive person and it would not do for him to be unnecessarily upset because when Mr. Savant gets upset, I get upset as well.”

Bruce, already on the edge, offered the other man a dangerous smile, his lips curling upwards in grim amusement, “Yes, that would be a pity, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, it would,” Felicity said tersely, the Loud Voice building up within her. “You know what else would be upsetting? Having a brawl break out in the middle of my house—again!”

His voice dropped to a more confidential level but his anger was still palatable, “Damn it, Felicity; I have just about had enough—!”

“You promised,” she reminded him.

“That was before I knew they were going to be here!” He growled.

She gave him a hard look, “A promise is still a promise; no fighting.”

His clenched his jaw, “Fine.”

She then turned her hard gaze on Creote, “And that goes for you, too,” she told him causing the huge man’s eyebrows to crawl towards his hairline in disbelief. “Bruce was being rude and I’m sure he’s very sorry for insulting you both,” he snorted beside her, crossing his arms in defiance, “or not,” she said with a sigh, “but this is my home and no one, I repeat, *no one* is getting into a fight in my apartment, am I understood?” She asked him in a hard and uncompromising tone.

“Yes, Mrs. Felicity,” Creote nodded as Savant began to snicker beside him.

“Well, I see who it is who’s going to be wearing the pants in your marriage, eh Bruce?” Savant said in amusement.

“What makes you think they’re getting married?” Laurel challenged.

“Oh please, love; look at him,” Savant said sweeping his hand towards a noticeably incensed Bruce. “It’s like the Bat’s been neutered or something; if that doesn’t scream ‘married’ I don’t know what does.”

“He has a point…” Renee muttered.

Bruce started towards him again but Felicity laid a calming hand on his arm. “First off, it’s just Felicity, not ‘Mrs. Felicity’,” she told Creote. “Bruce and I are not actually married…yet,” she added
when Bruce threw her a hard look. “As for you,” she turned her gaze towards Savant next.

“All?” Savant gave her a look of disdain that reminded her all too well of the way Isabel used to look at her, and felt her temper flare.

She focused all of her attention towards the man in front of her, her eyes sweeping over him from head to toe. Physically he was gorgeous; from his smooth British accent and pale blond hair that was pulled into a long ponytail that hung halfway down his back, to his ice blue eyes and cheekbones that could cut glass. To top it off, the man was built like a modern Adonis. His muscular thighs strained the denim of his jeans while his sweater was pulled tight over his broad chest and well-defined biceps. He was definitely more than just a simple ‘information broker’ that’s for sure. His muscles weren’t just there for looks either. His posture and bearing marked him as an experienced fighter and his cocky self-confidence wasn’t merely hubris on his part; he knew he could hold his own even without the assistance of his partner/bodyguard.

However, that was just what was on the surface. She delved deeper, her eyes meeting his with laser-like intensity. At first he met her gaze defiantly, both of them locked in a stare down but, after a moment, he faltered and began to look at her uncertainly.

There, she thought as she watched him shift slightly and fidget with his watch while Creote looked between them silently but obviously concerned. It was then that she saw what the others couldn’t seem to see. Ignoring Bruce, ignoring Creote and everyone else in the room, she made it just about the two of them as she locked on and looked deep.

In his eyes was a spark of innocence buried under years of pain and arrogance. Even though the man in front of her was older than she was by at least a few years, even though he was obviously a fighter and had most likely taken more than one life, there was a childlike quality to him; a sensitivity and deeply felt insecurity she suspected only the man who proudly referred to himself as his ‘nursemaid’ ever saw. Basically, for all his intelligence and smug superiority, he was a child; a cruel spoiled brat whose bravado was nothing more than a coping mechanism and, the second she got that, she knew she had him.

Channeling the voice of Mama T and Peggy when they were giving Luke a good dressing down over something, she eyed him like a bug, “Mr. Durlin, you are a guest in my home and you will be treated with courtesy under my roof; however,” she paused meaningfully and watched the other man shift uneasily once more, “I expect you to treat others with respect as well, understood? If you wish to remain here in our company then you will keep a civil tongue in your head or there will be consequences.”

“And what exactly would those consequences be, love?” He asked, his chin jutting out in a show of false bravado.

“You and Mr. Creote will be asked to leave,” she said simply.

He gave a bark of laughter at that, “That’s your idea of a threat? Pet, that’s not a threat; that’s an incentive!”

She shrugged, “If you want to leave, Mr. Durlin, then go right ahead; nothing’s stopping you.”

“No, they can’t!” Bruce burst out glaring at her along with the rest of the Birds.

“Yeah!” Helena said, her outrage matching his. “We didn’t just finish busting our asses bringing these freaks in just to let them walk out the door!”
“They can leave anytime they want to,” Felicity said firmly, her eyes sweeping the room before locking on Creote and Savant once more. “You are more than welcome to get up and leave and no one here will stop you or try to follow you.”

“Felicity…” Bruce growled in warning.

“No one,” she said, matching his intense stare with one of her own, “will follow you.”

Savant grinned and jumped to his feet, “You heard the lady, let’s go.” Creote got up slowly to join him, his body language far more guarded and apprehensive than his companion’s as he eyed the people surrounding them warily.

Savant offered Sara a particularly mocking smirk as he moved past her, “Thanks a lot for the rescue, Canary; I’ll be sure to return the favor someday. And thanks for the hospitality, Bruce,” he said in a way that made it obvious he knew he was poking the bear, “It’s been lovely catching up with you and the little Mrs.-to-be, and I’d love to stay for dinner, but places to go and people to see. You understand, right, mate? Come along, Mr. Creote!”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Bruce growled rising to his feet and blocking him, causing Creote to immediately go into a fighting stance while the rest of the Birds went on high alert.

“Sit down, Bruce,” Felicity said, getting between them.

“Felicity…” he warned.

“Sit. Down,” she said in an uncompromising tone before addressing the rest of her team, “You, too. If these men want to leave they can. They aren’t our prisoners.”

Bruce pointed towards Savant in aggravation, “You can’t expect me to just—”

“I can and I do,” she said easily, her eyes meeting his to let him know she had this covered.

“Baby…” he said in a low growl.

She nodded slightly, “Sit down,” she said in a softer, but no less firm of a tone.

Reluctantly, Bruce looked from her to the two men before his lips thinned into a grim line, “Fine,” he said sitting down on the couch.

“Oh, this is too funny,” Savant chuckled to Creote who said nothing as he was still watching the rest of them guardedly. “I never thought I’d see the day when the Batman would cower before a bit of fluff like this little bird.” From the corner of her eye, Felicity saw Sara bare her teeth angrily as he unwittingly used her endearment for her in such a condescending manner. “Thanks a bunch, love; it’s been fun. Good luck in keeping that man of yours in line,” he said, offering her a snappy salute as he practically skipped towards the front door.

“No problem!” She called out behind him. “Oh, and be sure to tell Amanda Waller I said hi. Or Lex Luthor, Miranda Tate, Ra’s al Ghul; you know, whichever one gets to you first,” she said off-handedly.

He froze and turned to her slowly, “Is that supposed to be another ‘threat’, love, or simply blackmail? Let me guess; if we walk out then you’re planning on calling in the troops as it were?”

“Nope, not blackmail, just a fact,” she shrugged, leaning her hip against the arm of the couch and crossing her arms over her chest. “Miranda has people watching my building to see who’s coming
and going, and if Miranda’s watching you know Amanda’s probably watching as well, especially since she obviously knew my people were headed to Siberia to get to you first. Also,” she added, pursing her lips slightly, “even though we both know that Lex and Amanda are in cahoots,” she shared a smirk with Renee, while ignoring Bruce’s glower, “neither of them play well with others so Lex probably has his people watching her people and Ra’s is always watching Bruce, plus he has a vested interest in this HIVE technology…” she sighed, “Basically, I’d loan you an umbrella but I doubt it would do you much good against whatever shit storm is waiting for you just outside of those doors. Hopefully it will be ARGUS since Amanda will probably let you live…for a while at least,” she said wrinkling her nose, “Of course, she’ll stick bombs in both of your spinal columns before shoving you inside a tiny cell, but,” she paused dramatically, “the good news is that she’ll let you out for suicide missions and I hear they have cable in the common room now. They do have cable, right?” She asked, turning to Lyla.

The other woman’s eyes twinkled in amusement, “Actually they have satellite, but it’s just the basic package.”

“Damn,” she winced, “Hope you’re not a Game of Thrones fan; I hear the new season’s going to be pretty intense. Not to mention that I’m pretty sure you can only get the CW in a separate superstation package and you look like a Vampire Diaries kind of guy. You have that whole…teen pretty boy heartthrob vibe going on,” she said gesturing towards him. “Or maybe it’s just the hair that’s making me think that; whatever,” she shrugged, her eyes sweeping over his reddening face in sympathy, “Anyway, bye-bye now and good luck,” she quipped before turning her back on them and plopping back down beside Bruce. She picked up her cup and took another sip, “I love Peggy Ann’s tea,” she hummed. “Of course, I also like yours, too.” She turned to Alfred. “By the way, I would love to get your recipe for those little teacakes you used to make.”

“Which ones?” Alfred asked, looking completely unfazed by the way the rest of them were staring at the two of them.

“The ones with the green tea,” she told him.

“Ah yes,” he nodded, “It’s not that difficult of a recipe really. The hardest thing about it is locating the right kind of chocolate. I can give you the name of a small specialty shop in the--”

“So you sent an entire team to Siberia to kidnap us, dragged us all the way back to the States, only to hand us over to same people your ‘Birds’ or whatever had to fight through to get us here in the first place?”

She turned slowly to look at him. Savant had crept up behind her, his brow furrowed and his expression a cross between disbelief and intense anger, “I’m not handing you over to anyone, nor did they kidnap you; they rescued you,” she said calmly, “All I’m doing is pointing out the obvious fact that you have a target on your back while drinking tea and exchanging recipes with my good friend, Alfred, before the rest of our dinner guests arrive.”

At that moment the phone rang and the British man put down his cup and saucer then got up from the chair he was occupying, “Would you like for me to get that for you, ma’am?”

“Thank you, yes,” Felicity said with a smile.

“Very good, ma’am,” he said nodding slightly before walking to the phone and speaking quietly into the receiver.

“As I was saying,” she said turning back to Savant, “there’s the door, feel free to show yourselves out, good luck, and again, sorry for any inconvenience my team may have caused you.”
“Right.” He sneered down at her, “The fact that you think I would ever fall for this little ruse of yours is either the most pathetic or the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life. I haven’t decided which one of those it is yet, but I think I’ll go with adorably pathetic.”

Sara and Bruce both rose to their feet to go after him but Felicity threw them warning looks before addressing him again. “You know what, Mr. Durlin? You’re right, I have no idea who’s out there so why don’t you go see for yourself then let me know how that turns out for you.” She again dismissed him and turned her attention to Alfred who was coming back to join them.

“Security called to say a Detective John Jones was here,” he told her.

“Great,” she said happily before turning her attention back to a clearly petulant Savant. “I’m sorry, did you need something else?”

“No,” he huffed.

“Then why are you still here? Like the lady said, Malfoy; there’s the door,” Renee said eyeing him with disdain. “And don’t let it hit ya where the good Lord split ya. Accio your gluteus maximus out the door-i-us.”

“More Harry Potter references, how charming,” he said in disgust. “You Americans and your queer obsession with that insipid children’s story. Or is it the movie version you’re referencing because God forbid that you should ever read a book?” He rolled his eyes at her. “Fine,” he said heading out again. “Come along Mr. Creote, let’s leave these sophisticates to their ‘dinner party’.”

The Russian, however, didn’t move, “Mr. Savant, perhaps we should--?”

Felicity felt the buzzing at the corners of her mind seconds before the doorbell rang and Alfred answered it. J’onn entered the apartment but, this time, his appearance wasn’t nearly as sharp or disorienting as it had been the first time. Instead it was merely a tickle at her consciousness and as soon as she saw the gentle expression on the other man’s face she smiled, “J’onn,” she said, feeling the poppy fizz of his name on her tongue as she got to her feet to join him along with a highly excitable Ace who emerged from the kitchen where he’d been ‘guarding’ over dinner.

“Felicity,” he greeted her in return, the syllables of her name chiming against her ears like musical notes. He was dressed similarly to how he was the first time they met; a deep green pullover sweater, jeans, and a jacket, the rich color setting off his emerald skin perfectly.

The two of them stood for a moment and Felicity’s skin tingled as the feeling of cool mist came over her again.

The dog yipped at her feet and he turned his gaze to him as well, “Hello my friend, it is good to see you as well.”

Gypsy, who had crept up beside him, looked at J’onn with a curious expression on her face, “I’m sorry, but have we met before?” She asked shaking her head slightly, “I feel like I know you from somewhere.”

“We have met, yes,” J’onn said, offering the other woman a soft smile. “Is Mordred here as well?” He asked, glancing around.

“Not yet,” Gypsy said in surprise. “How--?”

Bruce cleared his throat behind them and Felicity snapped out of it, “Oh, um, J’onn; this is Bruce.”
“Bruce Wayne,” he said, offering him his hand stiffly.

J’onn’s eyes met Bruce’s and he accepted his gesture as he inclined his head in greeting. “Thank you for allowing me into your home,” he said, meeting his firm grip without hesitation. In his other hand he held up a colorful gift bag and handed it to Felicity, “Also, I brought you a gift as I understand it is the custom when entering someone’s home on such an occasion as this one.”

“J’onn, you really didn’t have to---” she looked into the bag and frowned before pulling out an empty Chocos box.

“Yes, well, I had a few on the way over,” he told her sheepishly. “There are Oreos in there as well.”

“So I see,” she said, pulling out a second box, this one mostly full but still open.

“They were fine but you were correct; the Chocos are much better,” he told her.

“They really are,” she admitted before putting them back in the bag. “Why don’t you come join us in the living room? We’re still waiting for the others to arrive,” the phone rang and she offered him a shrug, “And that’s probably them.”

“It is, ma’am,” Alfred said approaching them. “Masters Luke and Dick as well as Mr. Queen are on their way up.”

“Why don’t we sit down and wait for them and, in the meantime, we can have tea and share some of your cookies before dinner?” Felicity suggested.

“Tea would be lovely,” he said, his smile brightening. “Do you have any honey?”

“I think we can probably find you some,” she nodded.

“How do we know each other again?” Gypsy asked as she led him over to the couch with the other Birds.

“It’s a long story…” he said slowly.

“Baby,” Bruce caught her arm and looked pointedly from the gift bag to a surly looking Savant. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” He asked in low tones.

“Because of the intoxicating effects of the cookies?” J’onn asked curiously from across the room. Bruce looked at him in surprise as they approached, “Excuse me; I didn’t mean to eavesdrop; it’s just that I have very acute hearing.”

“Intoxicating cookies?” Savant muttered to an equally confused looking Creote.

“Among other things,” Bruce said with a scowl as he cut his eyes towards them. “But yes; from what Felicity told me you seemed to have had a…reaction to them the last time. One that was quite disturbing according to what she and the others told me.”

“It was a bit disconcerting at first, yes,” he agreed, “But I have been experimenting and it appears that as long as I ingest them in moderation the effects are far less extreme,” he assured him. “Of course, the Oreos are not nearly as intoxicating as the Chocos so I’ve decided to limit my consumption of them to no more than eight to ten boxes a day until I build up a greater tolerance.” He paused, “But that only applies to the Chocos. When dealing solely with Oreos I believe I could more than double that number safely.”
“Eight to ten boxes,” Bruce repeated slowly.

“Or twenty boxes of the Oreos,” he reminded him. “They appear to have the strongest effects, regular chocolate or frosted cookies less so, and wafer cookies not at all.” He frowned, “I don’t particularly care much for the wafer cookies. They taste a bit like plastic,” he said wrinkling his nose slightly.

“Wait,” Renee broke in, “how many cookies have you eaten since last night in order to come up with that?”

“I’m not sure,” he frowned. “It’s all a bit fuzzy after you dropped me off at my apartment last night. I just walked down to the corner market and bought all the cookies they had so my figures are based more on the number of empty boxes I found when I woke up, not on any actual figures.” His eyeridges rose slightly, “There is a bit of leeway since I’m fairly certain I began eating them in the store.”

“Wow, and I thought I was jonesing for sugar,” Laurel said slowly.

“Look at it this way,” Renee said wryly, “at least we’ve finally met someone who eats more than you do.”

“Hilarious,” the other woman said with a grimace.

“There is something very wrong with these people,” Savant told his companion.

“I believe you may be right, sir,” the big man agreed in a sotto tone.

“Remind me to scrub the store’s security feeds and, after that, we have really got to have a discussion about what ‘moderation’ means,” Felicity said shaking her head slightly. The doorbell rang and Alfred went to answer it. She handed J’onn back the bag. “Why don’t you set these out while we wait for the other’s to join us?”

“Certainly,” he said before finishing his journey towards the sitting area, the large dog trailing behind.

“Okay, so…” she turned to their two uninvited guests, “Um, sorry you couldn’t stay but enjoy your evening.”

“You, too,” Savant said dryly as he headed for the door.

“This is a mistake,” Bruce told her just as Alfred moved to answer the door. “They have information we need.”

“And we’ll get it eventually, trust me, but forcing it out of him won’t work,” she told him.

“We could try,” he rumbled in the voice of the Bat.

“That’s what he wants,” she told him. “He’s trying to get under your skin so you’ll lose your cool.”

“Well, he’s succeeding,” Bruce bit out.

“Do you trust me, or not?” She asked with a scowl.

“I do trust you,” he told her. “It’s them I don’t trust.”

The minute Dick walked through the door and set eyes on the pair he stiffened, “What the hell are
Creote and Savant doing here?” He growled.

“What?” Oliver asked, narrowing his eyes on them. “Savant?” He spat out taking a step towards him causing the Russian to step forward protectively.

“Oliver!” Felicity said, getting between them. “Don’t.”

At the sound of their raised voices, Ace began to growl low in his throat as he moved away from J’onn to Felicity’s side where he bared his teeth in warning, his muscles tensed as he looked up at Creote, instantly clocking him as the biggest threat.

“Looks like this party is about to get interesting.” Helena said, palming the serving knife from the platter just in case as she and the rest of the Birds got up and began to move closer.

“It was just a matter of time,” Laurel told her as she and Renee reached surreptitiously in their boots for their weapons as well.

“What’s with the horse anyway?” Sara asked Tam. “I thought you were getting a little dog.”

“Don’t even get me started on that,” she told her as she reached for an andiron by the fireplace.

“Down Ace,” Felicity told him and the dog sat but continued his low growl, his eyes locked on the two strangers.

“Don’t what?” He asked, his fists balled at his sides. “Don’t wrap my fingers around this bastard’s throat after I take out tiny here? He nearly got you killed!”

“When was this?” Savant asked in confusion but was ignored as his companion stepped closer to Oliver, towering over him with a deadly serious expression on his face.

“You can try, chelovechek,” Creote said with a dangerous edge.

“Ne to'lo'ka ya mogu poprobovat' ; Mne udastsya,” Oliver returned in a low timbre. “I my uvidim, kak ‘nemnogo’ Vy dumayete, chto ya, kogda ya slomat' sheyu pryamo, prezhde chem vybrosit' etogo ublyudka ot storony etogo zdaniya.”

“Cool, Russian smack talk,” Tam said weighing the fireplace poker in her hand as she and the other Birds approached the group. “Now that’s hot.”

“What are they saying?” Laurel asked.

“The big guy called Oliver ‘little man’ in a kind of nasty way so Oliver basically told him that he’ll see just how ‘little’ he is after he breaks his neck before tossing the other one off the side of the building,” Sara told her.

“Okay, yeah; that is a little hot,” Laurel admitted.

“If anyone threatens Mr. Savant, I will break him,” the large Russian said in a deceptively calm tone.

“Shades of Rocky IV,” Lyla muttered.

“Well, game on, motherfucker; let’s do this,” Luke said taking a defensive stance beside Oliver, Dick, and J’onn while Bruce and the Birds all began to move into position as well with Sara putting herself between Felicity and the rest.

“Okay, you need to back up, Cutie,” she warned her in low tones.
“No, I---!” She grimaced. “Enough!” Felicity snarled at all of them, “No fighting in my house!”

“Damn right,” Tam said, moving towards her and eyeing all of them in turn. “I busted my ass decorating this place and I’m not going to have all my hard work ruined because you people have your heads up your asses!” She eyed the big Russian, “Hear that? Vyrezat’ der’mo i poluchit’ golovu iz zadnitsy!” Creote blinked in surprise as he looked down at her. “Goes for you, too; Mr. Yummy in Green Leather!” Tam said eyeballing Oliver before sweeping her eyes down his fit form, “Wow, and you really are yummy.” She turned to Felicity, “You know, Baby; you could do so much bet--”

“Tam!” Felicity scowled.

“I’m just saying,” she grumbled.

“If you want to leave, go!” She told the two men before turning to her brother and Oliver, “And if you want to rumble with them then do it outside where the snipers can pick off the winners!”

“Snipers? What snipers?” Savant asked in exasperation.

“Are you referring to the team surveilling the building?” J’onn asked, looking on curiously.

“Actually, I was just…guessing,” she said uncertainly. “There are snipers outside of the building?”

Bruce turned to him, the shadow of the Bat causing his expression to go cold, “League?”

Sara eyes hardened at that, “If it’s League then we need to suit up and get out there before they storm the building. I don’t care how much security you have on this place, they won’t stop until they get in.”

“It’s not League,” Dick told her.

“I clocked them as ARGUS,” Oliver said without taking his attention off the Russian. “Three on the roofline across from the penthouse and another three on street level plus a crew in the van. From what I could tell it was just a normal surveillance team but they are definitely interested in what’s going on in here.”

“They had directional listening equipment and telephoto lenses along with a bag team armed with tranq darts,” Luke told them as he shot another angry look towards the two newcomers, “Guess we know what they were looking for. Good thing the penthouse is soundproof and shielded with bulletproof glass.”

“Wildcat and his buddies along with those two female Orbital operators told us that on his way here he clocked some eyes on the building which is why we were late. We double backed so we could get a good look at them ourselves,” Dick told him.

Felicity frowned, “You met them before coming here?”

“Yeah,” Luke told her. “Between the four of them and those two other chicks, we managed to scare them off.”

“For the moment at least,” Oliver said carefully.

“What is this? Your own unique take on good cop/bad cop?” Savant snorted.

“Yeah,” Luke said, cracking his neck and he shifted his stance, “And guess who just got nominated to be the bad cop, asshole?”


“He’s right,” Oliver bit out as he cut his eyes towards Bruce who appeared equally aggrieved at the prospect of letting them go. “Are you onboard with just letting these two walk out of here after nearly getting Felicity killed?”

“No, I’m not,” Bruce growled.

“Again, I have no clue as to what any of you are talking about?” Savant said, looking genuinely confused. “Although, given the company, that’s hardly surprising!”

“Just go,” Felicity said in exasperation while laying a hand on the back of the dog’s neck comfortably. “They’re leaving,” she repeated. “Now.”

“Yes, we were,” Savant agreed, his perfect complexion growing ruddy with frustration.

“You know what?” Oliver said suddenly before stepping aside, “On second thought, go right ahead. And be sure to give Amanda my regards when she sticks a bomb in your spine.”

“She already tried that one on us, mate,” Savant said in a clipped British accent.

He smirked, “In that case, what’s stopping you?”

“Absolutely nothing,” he assured him before reaching for the door.

“Mr. Savant,” the mountainous Russian said, placing a surprisingly gentle hand over his, barring him from leaving. “Allow me to go ahead and see for myself that the way is clear first, yes?”

“This is ridiculous!” He burst out before noticing the stubborn expression on his companion’s face. “Fine,” he sighed in resignation before tromping back over to the couches and plopping down into his former position with a pouty expression.

Creote’s eyes met hers and she nodded slightly in reassurance as she and the others moved to join him back in the living area before he slipped out of the apartment.

Oliver’s eyes hardened as he looked towards where Savant was sitting then turned to the rest of their group, “Well, I’ll be damned if I—” He faltered suddenly as his gaze rested on one face in particular. “Tatsu?”

“Hello Oliver,” Katana said coolly as they faced one another.

Oliver froze, his countenance growing pale from shock, “How…”?

“You two know each other?” Bruce asked suspiciously as he looked from one to the other. “Why didn’t you say anything when I told you her name earlier?”

“Um,” he frowned, backing off slightly. “You said she was a longtime associate of yours so I didn’t connect the two; I just thought it was a coincidence. I thought she…I thought…” he swallowed his eyes fixed on the woman in question, “I thought you were dead. You, Akio, Maseo--? Waller told me you were dead.”

“It appears the rumors of my death were greatly exaggerated,” Katana said with the same stony expression on her face.
“I looked for you…” he shook his head.

“They killed Maseo and Akio but, instead of killing me right away, the Triad decided to hand me over to the Yakuza instead,” Tatsu told him. “Obviously I managed to escape.”

“I’m sorry,” he said faintly. “If I had known--”

“It’s done,” she said simply.

“How wonderfully melodramatic,” Savant called out from where he was sitting with a raised eyebrow. “I suppose now you’ll fall into each other’s arms and declare your undying love for one another?”

“Not hardly,” Tatsu said in clipped tones as she turned away from Oliver.

“Tatsu, I…” Oliver began helplessly.

“It’s done,” Tatsu said with grim finality.

“So, let me guess; you two slept together, right?” Helena asked with a smirk. “I’m only asking because the whispering samurai over here doesn’t usually lose her cool that easily and that is definitely Ollie’s modus operandi.”

“I hate to admit it but Helena has a point,” Sara said under her breath next to Felicity. “That’s definitely a ‘you done me wrong’ kind of pissed.”

“Great,” Felicity said shaking her head in response. “Let’s have ‘Friendsgiving’; it’ll be fun!,” she muttered. “Fun, right.”

“Besides,” Helena shrugged, “who in this room hasn’t slept with Oliver?”

“Not me,” Lyla said dryly.

“Me, neither,” Gypsy piped up.

“And definitely not me,” Renee said with a snort.

“He’s not really my type,” Dick said wryly, exchanging a sympathetic look with Renee.

“Don’t look at me,” Luke said, looking at Oliver askance. “I mean, we’re cool now but I still don’t like you that much.”

Oliver threw him a dirty look before glaring at Helena, “We didn’t sleep together.”

“Not even once?” She asked him knowingly causing the both of their faces to flush with anger along with some other inscrutable emotion.

“Have I told you how much I hate your team yet?” Bruce said between clenched teeth. “Both teams.”

“Several times,” she said darkly, “Okay, enough! Cool it, Helena,” Felicity told her as Tatsu and Oliver’s expressions hardened.

“Just having a little fun, boss lady,” she told her before sidling next to a very stiff Oliver before whispering in his ear, “Wow, so I bet this is your worst nightmare come true, huh Ollie? All your exes in one place? Talk about a player’s worst nightmare.”
“I never played anyone,” Oliver bit out. “I also never promised you anything.”

“True,” Helena said with a mock pout as she reached up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to his cheek, “Still, we did have some fun times, didn’t we, lover?”

“All of his exes in one room, huh?” Renee said with a hint of sympathy. “Poor bastard.”

“Not quite,” Laurel said dryly. “Unless, of course, Isabel, McKenna, and Sandra show up and then things will really start to get awkward.”

“Enough, Helena; just stop,” Felicity said tersely causing the other woman to roll her eyes then back off reluctantly.

“You’re really letting them go?” Oliver scowled, his attention shifting from Tatsu and Helena to her once again.

“They’re not prisoners; they’re guests,” she repeated for his benefit.

“Guests?” He asked rounding on her. “Tell me you didn’t invite this son of a bitch to dinner, too?”

“No,” she said throwing him a dirty look. “But if they want to leave then that’s on them. Now,” she said, eyeing each of them in turn, “we’re all going to sit down and wait for Wildcat and the other guests to arrive and then we’re having a pleasant dinner; understood?”

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” Oliver said tersely before catching her hardened expression. “Fine! Let’s all just make pleasant chitchat with the lowlife bastard who sold you out to Slade before we share a holiday moment as one big happy family!”

“Exactly!” She told him, not backing down.

“By all means, then! Let’s go have cookies and tea!” He said, his voice dripping with sarcasm before stomping over to the sitting area and glowering at Savant who merely ignored him.

“I told you we should have gone to a restaurant,” Bruce said glaring at pretty much everyone by that point.

Felicity held up a finger as she rounded on him, her face stiff with anger, “I swear to God, if you say one more word, you’re never getting laid ever again.”

“Fine,” he bit out.

“Have I mentioned yet how much I love this place?” Renee asked Laurel as they and the rest of the Birds followed them back towards the living area. “So much so that I’m seriously thinking of selling my loft and moving in at this point. I mean, it’s just like living at my parent’s house; sniping, growling, exes bickering, mom telling dad he’s sleeping on the couch tonight, knife fights bound to break out at any second. The only difference is that no one here keeps telling me that I’m just going through a phase and that once I meet a nice boy, I’ll change back to being ‘normal’.”

“Now that you mention it…” Laurel said, sharing a look with Sara.

Sara grimaced ruefully, “The only thing missing for us is dad bitching about how all the newer car models have computers in them and that’s why he won’t give up that raggedy Mustang of his and mom going off on Uncle Dennis after he says something about how democrats should just call themselves communists and get it over with.”
“Uncle Dennis is a dick,” she agreed. “Oh, and speaking of new cars, Felicity got us a minivan.”

“A what?” She said blankly.

Laurel grinned, “It’s awesome; it even comes with a built in vacuum cleaner.”

“And an X-Box,” Renee added.

“Did she just say ‘minivan’?” Gypsy asked slowly.

“Minivan,” Lyla nodded.

“Okay, that’s fucked up,” Helena said in disgust.

They all settled back into their former seats in absolute silence; Luke, Dick, and Oliver settling in near the Birds, as Ace sat on the floor between her and J’onn, while Bruce remained standing, his expression thunderous as he stared down at the information broker.

The phone rang, breaking the silence and causing everyone to flinch.

“I’ll get that, ma’am,” Alfred said getting up from his chair. “I imagine that will be Mr. Grant and the other guests.”

“Thank you, Alfred,” Felicity nodded.

Okay, so no more dinner parties for her, she thought as she looked around at everyone’s tense and uncomfortable expressions.

“This is beyond ridiculous,” Savant muttered to himself. “I do have other things to do besides being stared at by a bunch of strangers, you know,” he grumbled in a slightly louder voice. “Really, if I had known that this is what I’d be facing when I got here I would have rather stayed in Siberia! Yes, the whole League and ARGUS situation was somewhat inconvenient but at least it was better than this.”

He took a sip from his cup and grimaced as he picked up his Oreo. “At least the food was better. They had the most wonderful caviar there; simply divine,” he said with a sigh as he bit into it. “Creote would often incorporate some of the local caviar into our meals. I especially enjoyed yesterday’s breakfast,” he said wistfully. “He made eggs benedict using blinis with a bit of caviar on top.” He took another sip of tea. “It really was quite lovely.”

“I want to change my bet,” Lyla said, breaking the silence as she leaned towards Sara.

“Nope, no takesies backsies,” she said smugly. Helena snorted and Sara eyed her in amusement, “You thinking of backing down, too, there Nutsy?”

“Not on your life, Tweety,” she assured her.

“What now?” Felicity asked wearily as she pinched off a small piece of her leftover cucumber and cream cheese sandwich and fed it to Ace who gobbled it up greedily.

“Tell you later,” Sara assured her with a wink.

“They’ve been doing that since we left Siberia,” Savant said irritably. “Bets, counter-bets, side bets; one would think we were in Las Vegas for all the coarse language and juvenile bit of sport they seem to all be enjoying at my expense.” He rolled his eyes at them, “Though who knows what it’s about; they were all whispering and huddled around thick as thieves, tittering and making eyes at Creote like a bunch of school girls with a crush! It was really quite revolting.”
“Jealous?” Sara asked, her smile broadening slightly.

“Of what? Of your childish infatuation with my bodyguard?” He snorted. “Of course not, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you.”

“Hopes up?” Lyla asked carefully. “Hopes up about what exactly?”

“And why?” Gypsy added. She turned to Sara, “By the way, is it too late to put in a bet? Because I want to put ten on ‘yes, they are’.”

“Sorry, all bets are down,” Sara told her.

“‘Yes, they are’ what?” He asked in confusion.

“Don’t worry about them,” Lyla said quickly, “Now you were about to tell us why none of us should get our hopes up? Is he already involved with, um, someone…like a girlfriend maybe?” She asked meaningfully.

“No, nothing like that, it’s just ridiculous to think that he’d be interested in any of you,” he said airily. “I assure you, none of you are his type.”

“And what is Mr. Creote’s type exactly?” Sara asked, the mischievous twinkle returning to her eye. “Girls? Boys? Both?”

Savant began to answer her then paused, “I’m not really sure actually but I’m positive that none of you fit the bill.”

“Pay up,” Helena said triumphantly turning towards Sara.

“Not until we get confirmation from Big Red,” Sara told her. “After all, he could have just forgotten about it because of his weird brain thing.”

Luke and Oliver exchanged looks while Bruce growled something unintelligible under his breath before finally sitting down beside her and reaching for his cup, downing it quickly.

“What am I missing here?” Dick asked in confusion.

Sara waved him off, still speaking to Helena, “Until the Jolly Red Giant confirms it; no dice.”

“You’re just grasping at straws there, Tweety,” Helena told her. “Me and Blackhawk got this in the bag so get ready to pay up.”

Gypsy looked towards the door where Creote left out, “I think Helena might be right; I’m pretty sure something that big would probably be hard to forget; brain thing or no brain thing.”

Lyla began to snicker beside her and Luke again turned to Oliver, “Are they betting on…?”

“I think so,” he said with a grimace.

Bruce turned towards her in a low hiss, “I’m about five seconds from kicking all of these people out of here with the exception of Savant who better start talking about something other than his choice in breakfast foods soon, otherwise you’re going to have to redecorate again!”

She closed her eyes and rubbed her fingers over her forehead in order to stave off the migraine that was probably long overdue. “Bruce…” she said warningly then sighed.
“Now,” he told her.

“Okay, fine,” she said before looking to Savant. “Since we’re stuck here anyway, perhaps you wouldn’t mind answering a few of our questions?”

“Is this my ‘interrogation’?” The other man asked sardonically.

“Just passing time. Answer or don’t answer, it’s completely up to you,” she assured him while ignoring Bruce who was clenching his jaw so tightly his teeth were creaking.

“Fine,” Savant gestured dismissively before pouring himself another cup of tea.

“What do you know that has ARGUS, the League, and Miranda all gunning for you?”

He raised his eyebrows with a grimace before answering, “The obvious answer would be the location of Luthor’s secure facility where he keeps his alien tech, but the truth is that I honestly have no idea,” he told her.

“Really?” She frowned.

“Wait, did he just say ‘alien tech’?” Gypsy asked.

“That’s what I heard,” Sara said with a frown.

“Aliens?” Helena said flatly, “Oh, you’ve got to be shitting me.”

“Oh, don’t worry; it gets better, trust me,” Laurel said dryly.

“Aliens are quite real actually,” J’onn said as he munched happily on another cookie.

“How do you know?” Helena challenged. “Who are you anyway?”

“I’m J’onn,” he told her. “I am Felicity’s friend and a member of the Birds of Prey like the rest of you.”

“I thought he was a detective?” Savant asked, momentarily distracted by the man sitting beside her.

“I am,” he assured him, “but I’m also a Bird.”

“Since when?” Helena asked. “And what are you supposed to be anyway; some kind of cop turned ‘alien’ expert?”

Renee snorted, “You have no idea.”

“Okay, can we just focus here?” Felicity asked the rest of them before turning her attention back to Savant. “So you really don’t know why they’re after you or where Luthor is keeping the tech Ra’s is after?”

“Ra’s?” Sara asked sharply. “What am I missing here?”

“I’ll explain all that to you later, I promise,” Felicity assured her before turning back to Durlin. “You were saying?”

“No, I don’t.” He put down his cup and took a deep breath before answering her, “Well, that’s not entirely true; I do know the locations of several of his little hidey holes along with Amanda’s, but I doubt Luthor would be foolish enough to stash it anywhere I could find it and he certainly wouldn’t
trust ARGUS to keep it safe,” he said contemplatively. “However someone, and I suspect I know who,” he said darkly, “sent out that rumor which is but one more reason why Amanda is after me. Horrible woman,” he muttered into his cup.

Felicity frowned, “Rumor?”

He hummed in affirmation, “Rumor; an unfounded one at that, planted solely to discredit me, although why I have no idea,” he told her.

“So that’s why the League is after you, too; because of this unfounded rumor?” She asked in confusion.

“I’m not really sure why the League is after me,” he admitted. “They have their own information brokers, even though I am, of course, the best,” he said airily. “However, I very much doubt it’s because they want to put me to work like Amanda would, if that’s what you mean. If they wanted to buy information from me, then they could’ve simply paid me for it; no need to go to all this trouble! I mean, it very well may be that Ra’s decided to cut through the middle man, as it were, in order to come to me directly but, from what I could tell, his assassins seemed less interested in getting information out of me and more interested in removing my head from my shoulders.”

“I understand the impulse,” Bruce said grimly.

“You always were a bit of a buzzkill, Bruce,” the other man said with a withering glare. “Now is this interrogation over or what because I’d very much like to finish my tea in peace.”

At that moment the door opened and Wildcat filed in along with Mordred, Barda, Sonia, Booster, Ted, and a very concerned looking Creote.

“So we ready to eat or what?” Wildcat asked broadly. “Because, I gotta tell ya, running off them ARGUS assholes kind of builds up a guy’s appetite.”

“I managed to hack the surveillance van with my tablet,” Mordred said next to Wildcat as they approached.

Felicity’s ears perked up at that, “What did they get?”

“Big fat goose egg,” he told her with a grin as he reached into the messenger bag slung over his shoulder to hand it to her before settling down beside Gypsy and Lyla. “But, just in case, I corrupted their system with a little virus I may or may not have written myself but not before downloading everything they had.” He shook his head, “You’d think they’d have found my backdoor by now, but no,” he said happily. “That’s what Waller gets for hiring corporate drones in khakis and ties instead of real hackers who choose to express their individuality and creativity through body modification.”

“I thought you just had a thing for half naked big-eyed cartoon girls and that vampire shit,” Wildcat said, giving the younger man a dubious look.

“It’s not ‘vampire shit’,,” the much younger man told him with a scowl. “It’s part of a spiritual lifestyle that embraces the darkness within.”

“Whatever you say there, Melvin,” Wildcat shrugged.

“It’s Mordred,” he said tersely.

“Right,” the older man drawled.
Felicity scrolled through the information, “According to this, it was just a low level mission meaning
they were just going off a hunch when they set up the surveillance team based on my past association
with both Team Arrow and Sara.” She handed Mordred back his tablet and looked to the newcomers
all in turn, “You guys aren’t suited up; did they see your faces?”

“No, we kept it pretty much on the down low,” Dick told her. “Luke did his belligerent black guy
routine while Booster and Ted caught the other guy and pretended to have some kind of lover’s spat-
”

“We weren’t pretending to have a lover’s spat,” Ted objected. “We were arguing about sports and
distracted the guy by dragging him into it.”

“Yeah,” Booster said, “Why? Do we give off a gay vibe because we’re totally not gay?” He said
uncertainly.

“No, and I was like, ‘Hey man, lemme hold a dollar’,” her brother said with a grin. “Hey man,
that’s a nice camera; where’d you get that? Can I see it for a minute; I might want to get one?” He
shook his head, “There’s nothing better than using some white dude’s fear of a black guy in a bad
neighborhood against him.”

“Yeah,” Dick said slowly. “Anyway, while they managed to get rid of the guys on the ground,
Mordred hacked the van and Wildcat called in some friends.”

“I had some of the gang kids who come to my gym do a little recon for us and paid ‘em off by giving
them all that spray paint we had left over from the other day,” Wildcat told them as he reached for a
cucumber sandwich. “Let’s just say that ARGUS is going to be springing for a new paintjob for their
tactical van.”

“Then the rest of us took the guys on the roof,” he finished.

Sonia nodded, “Barda and I took out the men on the roofline facing the south while Oliver and Dick
took out the ones to the east.”

“It was child’s play,” the taller of the two women said with a shrug. “They practically ran away
screaming with their tails tucked between their legs.”

“They never saw us,” Oliver told them. “We knocked them out, took their SIM cards and wallets
along with the memory cards from the cameras they had set up, then tossed them into the dumpster.”

“Gave the cameras to Wildcat’s kids as well so if they turn up in a pawn shop it’ll look like they just
got jumped by the locals,” Dick added.

Mordred reached into his messenger bag and began pulling them out, “I figured I’d go through those
later then give,” he peeked inside one of the wallets, “Mr. Amos Talbot and friends a nasty little
surprise the next time they open their inter-office email.”

“Good, so that means no one knows we’re here; can we go now?” Savant asked the Russian
impatiently as he approached.
“I am sorry, Mr. Savant,” he said gravely. “Although the ARGUS people appear to be gone, I do not recommend we leave at this time.”

“He’s right,” Felicity told him. “It *was* a hunch but, even if they didn’t see you guys, Amanda will know something is up once her people report back that several groups of people working together managed to run them off.

“Oh, bloody hell!” He said with a scowl. “Literally! I’m in hell and now I’m faced with spending an entire evening with these…” he looked around at the Birds, “tittering women and their incessant questions!”

“Tittering women?” Laurel repeated with a scowl.

“And who is this rude little man, exactly?” Barda asked her, giving Savant a dangerous look.

“Again, I am sorry, Mr. Savant, but it is for your own safety,” he told him solemnly.

“Don’t apologize to him,” Tam said shooting the pouting man in question a glare before turning to Creote.

“Excuse me?” Savant asked her, taken aback by her tone.

“You heard me,” Tam said setting her jaw stubbornly. “Just because you’ve got your knickers in a twist is no reason to take it out on your boyfriend, sweet pea!” She looked at Creote again, “You do know you can do better, right? Seriously, I know a ton of people I can set you up with; they’re total size queens so I just know they’ll love you.”

Creote’s jaw dropped slightly as Savant looked on in confusion, “What?” He said, shaking his head slightly.

Lyla buried her face into Gypsy’s shoulder, as she shook with silent laughter while the rest of the Birds began to snicker.

“I think I’m in love with your sister,” Sara said seriously.

“Yeah, that happens,” Felicity responded ruefully. “Pretty much everybody falls in love with Tam at some point, no one is immune to her.”

“Um, hey, Director Starling,” Ted said, approaching the group alongside Booster.

Savant, already looking miffed because he was stuck there, narrowed his eyes him, “Who the hell is ‘Director Starling’?”

“I’m…” Felicity began before shaking her head, “Never mind. Look, just—just call me ‘Felicity’, okay Ted?”

“Oh, sure; Felicity,” he nodded then held out a covered dish, “I didn’t know if this was a potluck kind of thing so, just in case, I brought pie.”

“*We* brought pie,” Booster stressed.


“I thought we agreed to say it was from both of us?” Booster muttered under his breath.

He tossed the other man a dirty look, “No, what we agreed on was that I would say it was from both
of us *if* you paid half which you didn’t—again!"

“Lover’s spat,” Dick muttered.


“I told you I’d pay my half tomorrow,” Booster said defensively. “I just…forgot my wallet.”

“And how is it that whenever we agree to go halves on something you always seem to leave your wallet at home? How do you explain that, huh?” Ted demanded.

The other man shrugged, “Coincidence?”

“They’ve been like this the entire ride over here,” Barda said to Felicity, rolling her eyes. “I was going to club them both over the head but Sonia stopped me.”

“A decision which I am quickly coming to regret,” the Japanese woman said as she eyed the two bickering men with a frown.

“Anyway…” Ted said roundly as he turned back to Felicity, “I brought—”

“We brought,” Booster broke in.

“Pie,” he said ignoring him. “It’s Kentucky pie; I got it from my favorite—”

“Our favorite,” Booster corrected.

“Bakery,” he said, his lips tightening into a grimace before forcing a smile, “Have you ever tried it?”

“No,” Felicity said, forcing her own smile as she attempted to escape the awkwardness of the situation. “What’s in it?”

His expression relaxed and his smile became more genuine, “Oh well, you’re going to love it! It’s chocolate, caramel, and pecan pie with—”


Ted stopped and looked at Felicity with a raised eyebrow, “You are?”

“Yeah,” she said reluctantly.

“Oh,” he said crestfallen.

“He picked it, not me,” Booster said blithely causing his companion to stare daggers in his direction.

“I’ll just, um…” he hitched his thumb toward the foyer before heading in that direction, “take it out there.”

“Not the sharpest tack in the toolbox but he means well,” Wildcat said shrugging slightly.

He opened the door and set it outside in the hallway before coming back inside with an overly bright grin, “Okay, so when’s dinner?”

“Right now,” Felicity said getting up.

“Would you like me to serve, ma’am?” Alfred offered.
“No, you’re here as family, remember?” Felicity told him. “We can just serve ourselves. You set up in the kitchen, right?” She asked Tam.

“Yeah, I brought some extra chairs and a folding table, it should be fine,” she reminded her. “If we don’t have enough chairs then somebody can just eat at the bar.”

“We’re eating in the kitchen? Like animals?” Savant asked dubiously. “ Doesn’t this place have a proper dining room?”

“It’s Friendsgiving,” Tam told him with a frown.

“What the bloody hell is a ‘Friendsgiving’ and how does that affect our ability to dine like civilized people?” He scoffed.

The large Russian looked down at his companion with a patient expression, “I think, Mr. Savant, that they are dining in the kitchen as the formal dining room is for guests and not for family occasions such as this.”

“I like you,” Tam said, sidling up to Creote and looping her arm through his.

The large Russian looked down at her in surprise, “Thank you?” He said uncertainly.

“Come on, sweetie; you’re sitting next to me,” she said tugging him along. “Sourpuss over there can lump it and sit at the kiddie table.”

“Alright…” he said slowly as he allowed himself to be led into the kitchen with Savant trailing behind them and shooting daggers in Tam’s direction.

“I don’t know who that impertinent young woman is but I already loathe her,” Savant muttered.

Bruce merely looked on with a glower that was mirrored by Oliver’s while Sara came up beside Felicity and whispered, “Guess not everybody’s a fan of your sister after all, huh?”

“Guess not,” she said shaking her head and again ignoring Bruce as he huffed in displeasure beside her.

*\?\?\?/\?\?/\? The food was amazing, she was surrounded by friends both old and new but, despite all that, Friendsgiving dinner was decidedly un-friendly.

It was amazing how just the simple addition of two extra people could turn everything to shit.

“What is that again?” Savant asked pointing.


“I don’t know; I kind of miss the regular cranberry jelly,” Renee said, eyeing the still warm bowl of cranberry glaze with suspicion. “You know the kind that when it comes out it still looks like the inside of the can.”

“Yeah, I like that kind, too,” Wildcat agreed. “I also like it when the sweet potatoes got marshmallows all nice and burnt on top of ‘em.”

Savant made a disgruntled noise, “And these?” He asked pointing to some other dishes.
“Cauliflower and Broccoli Gratin With Camembert Cheese,” Alfred answered before passing down the rolls to Dick, “and wild rice, apple, and cranberry stuffing. Also, if you prefer to stick with the vegetarian dishes, there’s a spinach gruyere soufflé and, some of my personal favorites, kale with garlic and cranberries, and bruschetta with warm arugula and chickpea puree.”

“In other words, hummus,” he said in distaste.

“I like it,” Ted said from where he and Booster were sitting at the bar. “It’s nice and spicy.”

“Mr. Wildcat, while it may not be the candied yams you’re used to, I believe you’ll quite like these sherryed sweet potatoes with apples,” Alfred told him as he handed the dish down. “The caramelized brown sugar and sweetness of the liqueur should provide a lovely counterpoint to the tartness of the apples.”

“Not bad,” the other man said as he tried some. “Still not as good as burnt marshmallows though.”

“What kind of French fries are these?” Booster asked holding one up.

Felicity sighed, “They aren’t French fries; they’re baked lemon garlic rutabaga wedges.”

“Oh,” he said staring at it, “Because it tastes like French fries only weird.”

“God save me from the unwashed masses,” Savant muttered crossly as he picked at his dinner.

“The leek and mushroom croquettes are nice,” Felicity said in an attempt to brighten things up a bit. “They remind me of latkes.”

“They are nice, aren’t they?” Alfred agreed. “And so surprisingly light despite being fried.”

“I like the turducken,” Laurel announced. “I’m in it for the meat and the carbs!”

“Me, too,” Renee told her. “That and pie.”

“We do have some lovely pre-made pies as well as a pumpkin ginger cheesecake,” Alfred told them. “And to keep on with the harvest theme the chef prepared these lovely pumpkin sage Parkerhouse rolls,” he said gesturing towards the overflowing basket near the beautifully sliced turducken.

“Ooh, hand those down,” Laurel said with a gimme gesture.

“God, I wish I had your metabolism,” Renee said with a sigh as she took the basket from Sara.

She hummed happily as she snatched up a couple of the still steaming rolls then reached for a small, oblong covered dish. “Mmm, butter!”

“Hey, I have a question,” Oliver said, leaning forward slightly in his chair as he glared at Savant, “Why did you lie to Slade about Felicity?”

The entire table stilled.

“What?” He asked, turning to the other man with a frown.

“Slade Wilson.”

“Deathstroke, yes; I’m familiar,” he said.

Oliver’s lips tightened, “You sold him bad information.”
“Pardon?” He scowled.

Bruce broke in, his own expression hard as granite, “Six months ago you sold him information that said Felicity’s father was a man named Anthony Ivo; why?”

Sara looked to Felicity in surprise, “When was this?” She hissed under her breath but Felicity waved her off.

“Felicity…?” Savant’s voice trailed off.

“Smoak,” she told him. “Or Felicity Smoak-Fox; in other words, me.”

“I thought your name was Starling? That’s what the other idiot, not the good looking one, but the scrawny one said,” He asked pointing at Ted.

“Hey!” The scrawny one objected.

“You really think I’m good looking?” Booster asked hopefully.

“That’s just my handle,” she said tightly.

“Your handle is ‘Starling’?” He frowned. “That’s a terrible handle; might as well call yourself ‘The Pidgeon’ or ‘Flying Vermin’.” He paused and looked to Bruce, “Oh, forgot; Bruce holds the flying vermin title already.”

“Just answer the question,” Bruce growled.

“Do we really need to do this during dinner?” Felicity asked dourly.

“Yes,” Bruce and Oliver said simultaneously in the exact same low tones they used in hood and cowl.

“Fine!” She said flatly before casting her eyes towards their uninvited guests, “You might answer them or they’ll just brood and grumble about it until dinner is completely ruined.”

Not that it would make any difference, this dinner was pretty much a disaster from the get go.

Bruce was right; she should have just ordered take out for everybody and stayed in bed.

“The answer is that I never sold Deathstroke any information about a ‘Felicity Smoak’ or a ‘Felicity Smoak-Fox’,” Savant said easily. “But, if I had, I assure you it would have been accurate.”

“Bullshit!” Oliver burst out.

Felicity blinked in surprise, “But Slade said you sold him that information. He named you by name.”

“Yeah,” Oliver said, his eye still firmly on Savant, “Or are you going to claim that your ‘weird brain thing’ prevented you from remembering that part?”

“My ‘weird brain thing’,” he shot the other man a dirty look, “may affect my sense of time and jumble events, but the information stays the same. I can’t forget anything ever and I can honestly say that I have never sold anyone any information about a ‘Felicity Smoak’!”

“Then you’re lying because I happen to know for a fact that you did,” Oliver said dangerously.

“He is not,” Creote interrupted. His eyes fixed on Oliver as he spoke, “I have been with Mr. Savant
for five years, I know every client and have helped him with his condition by being both his
bodyguard and his memory keeper and he did not sell this information to Deathstroke.”

“Besides, I don’t care whether you think I’m lying or not; you asked a question and I answered it,”
Savant added. “However, that said, you should know that I never actually dealt with Deathstroke
directly as I make a habit of avoiding people who refer to themselves as ‘death’ anything unless I
absolutely have to. I always went through his business partner, so if there was any sort of
miscommunication than it’s most likely her fault, not mine.”

“Her?” Felicity asked with a frown.

“Isabel Rochev,” he told her in an almost bored tone, “But, of course, I’m sure you already knew
that.”

“What?” Felicity and Oliver both burst out as the room went deathly quiet.

“Rochev was working with Slade?” Bruce growled.

“Oh, well, I guess you didn’t know that then,” he said archly then smirked. “Oh, this is rich.”

“For how long?” Oliver demanded, his expression a mask of rage.

“Years,” he told him. “Ever since she and Slade partnered up to form Stellmoor International in the
first place.”

Oliver gaped at him, “What?”

“Stellmoor International,” he repeated. “Originally it was set up as a front in order to launder the
money Deathstroke made as a mercenary, but after he partnered with Isabel Rochev they began to
grow it into a legitimate business.” He shook his head at them, “How do you not already know this?”
He asked looking to Oliver, “Most of the businesses they brought in at the start belonged to your
father and his little cabal.”

“My father?” Oliver burst out, shaking his head as if to clear it.

Okay, now that was skirting some really dangerous territory and the last thing she wanted was for
Oliver to find out about Isabel and his dad’s unusual relationship over dinner.

“But what about Miranda?” She asked, distracting him.

“Oh, yes, well, she took over Stellmoor after Slade went to that lovely ARGUS SuperMax Amanda
built on that island of yours,” he said, looking at Oliver pointedly. “Like I said, information is my
business.”

“So Miranda and Isabel were both working with Slade?” Sara said slowly.

“Isabel was,” Savant told her. “I find it highly doubtful that Miranda would ever give a man like
Slade the time of day.” He glanced at Bruce, “Although I have always found her taste in men to be
rather suspect.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Bruce growled.

“You know Miranda?” Felicity asked.

(Of course, I know Miranda,” Savant chuckled darkly, “You mean you haven’t figured that out
either yet?”)
“Figured out what?” Bruce demanded, swiftly losing his patience.

“Who Miranda is, of course,” the other man said teasingly.

“Are you implying that this ‘Miranda’ is just an alias?” Dick asked, his scowl matching Bruce’s by that point.

“Makes sense,” Mordred broke in quietly from beside Gypsy and the entire table looked towards him.

“Why? What do you know?” Bruce asked.

“When Alice and I started investigating Miranda, her history seemed to go back years but there were a few red flags that kept popping up like how she seemed to be around for years on paper but only recently started becoming active in Stellmoor,” he explained. “At the time we figured it was just a merger or something. Speaking of which, isn’t Alice supposed to be here?” He asked turning to Felicity with a frown.

“Um, yeah,” she said, sharing a look with J’onn. “We’ll get into that later. So how old is this identity she’s using?”

“We don’t know,” Mordred told her. “Like I said, the name ‘Miranda Tate’, if it is an alias, is one she’s had on the backburner for years; like decades. We’re talking social security, tax records, the whole nine yards.”

“So who the hell is she?” Oliver bit out, looking to the information broker.

“If you’re too stupid to figure it out then I’m not telling,” Savant said triumphantly.

Bruce began to get up from his chair with the intentions of throttling the other man but Felicity stopped him by placing a hand on his arm.

“He’s just trying to frustrate you so that you’ll lose your cool,” she warned him.

“Well, he’s succeeded!” He bit out. “Tell me or--!”

“Or what?” Savant asked lazily.

Creote gave him a warning look, “Mr. Savant…”

“No,” he said, waving off his companion, “I want to know what he intends to do with me? Beat me up? Torture the information out of me? Maybe dangle me off the roof by my heels?” He asked, seemingly unmoved by any of it. “I’m not afraid of a few bumps and bruises, Bruce; as well you should know, so what’s my incentive to tell you anything? After all, the Bat doesn’t kill, remember?”

“The Bat might not, but I have no problem with it and neither does Canary,” Oliver said coldly, gaining his attention.

“Trained League Assassin, Captain Cupcake,” Sara added. “So do you want to give with the information or do you want Oliver and me to play rock, paper, scissors over who gets to toss your corpse off the roof once we’re done?”

“I’m okay with it, too; that is as long as it doesn’t count against my probation,” Helena said lazily as she munched on an asparagus spear.

“It counts,” Felicity said firmly.
To his credit, Savant didn’t so much as blink, “Go ahead,” he told her. “Death doesn’t frighten me either. You see, ‘cupcake,’” he said with a sneer causing Sara to narrow her gaze at him in a way that usually signaled that someone was about to need emergency medical attention sooner rather than later, “I’ve been in this business for a while now, long enough that I’ve been threatened, tortured, and even shot on more than one occasion so there’s really no point in threatening me.”

“Oh, there’s a point all right,” Oliver told him. “It’s called an ‘arrowhead’; care for me to demonstrate?”

“Sorry, but I’m having too much fun watching Bruce spin his wheels, desperate to figure out just what it is he missed, to be worried about something as silly as dying,” he said cheerfully. “However, just to be sporting, old chum, I’ll give you a hint—”

“I’d like to give that guy a hint,” Renee muttered darkly.

“—it would appear that Arrow boy over here isn’t the only one being haunted by the ghosts of old relationships past; anyone?” He asked looking around the table. “No?” He frowned, “Oh, come on! That should have been obvious!” He tutted.

“Just tell me!” Bruce growled as he stood up, both fists clenched and sitting against the table.

“Okay, clue number two; she and the Canary have a lot in common,” Savant said with a smirk as he cut his eyes towards Sara.

Sara scowled, “What does that mean; that she’s connected to both the Arrow and Batman’s missions, or is she League?”

“All of the above!” He cackled gleefully.

“Okay, tell you what,” Wildcat said, cracking his knuckles, “you guys go dangle Tinkerbell off the roof while me, Luke and Barda handle the big guy and then we’ll have dessert.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Luke said, putting down his fork.

“I look forward to the challenge,” Barda said, looking towards the Russian with a dangerous glint in her eye. “It will surely be a glorious battle indeed.”

“No one touches Mr. Savant,” the Russian warned them in a low growl.

“Just stop!” Felicity told them, now at the end of her patience. There was a low rumble of thunder outside as a light sleet began tapping against the glass doors. “No one is doing anything to anyone!”

“Felicity—” Oliver bit out, his steak knife already in hand as he eyed a now very alert Creote.

“Put the knife down, Oliver!” She snapped before looking around the table. “The only thing I want to see you use that on is the goddamn turducken, otherwise I will be beyond pissed! And no one is dangling anyone off the roof, understood? We’re supposed to be having dinner, not some kind of free-for-all where we go around stabbing people and threatening them with torture before serving them pie!”

“Oh, that’s enough,” Dick said wryly. “Felicity’s right; everybody just needs to calm down, at least until after dinner. After all, we don’t want to look bad in front of the psychopaths.”

“You’re not helping,” she told him before turning to Savant. “As for you, you want to play a game, then fine; play it with me!”
“You?” He said with a smirk as he took in her cropped sweater, short tartan skirt, and kitty flats. “Sorry pet, but Bruce can barely keep up with me on his best day and I’d hate to have to embarrass you in front of your friends and family.”

“I’ve been told I’m a pretty smart cookie myself, so try me,” she told him, focusing all of her attention on the other man and digging deep once again just like she did earlier.

Savant watched her carefully, their eyes locked as she let everything else just melt away.

“What two cities are linked by the Oriental Express?” He asked at last.

She frowned, “Paris and Istanbul; what does that have to do with Miranda?”

She saw both Tam and J’onn looking at her in confusion from the corner of her eye but ignored them.

“Nothing,” he told her with a smirk. “Just testing to see if you’re even worth my time. Ready for the next question?”

“Depends, will it lead me to answers about Miranda?” She asked him.

“Eventually,” he said, his eyes lighting up at that. “Tokelau is a dependency of which country?”

“New Zealand,” she answered easily. "Are we done yet?"

He hummed at that, his eyebrows drawing together in consternation. “The cities of Cairo in Egypt and Fez in Morocco are generally accepted to have the oldest of what type of institution in the world?”

“University,” she told him impatiently.

“If a simply connected polyhedron has 92 vertices and 150 edges, how many faces does it have?”

“Sixty,” she told him, “Now will you tell me about Miranda?”

“One more question first,” he said, his expression determined. “Where did you study?”

“MIT,” she told him. “Is that the last question?”

“Not quite, although this one should be easy for you given your background,” he told her then began to speak at a rapid-fire pace, “What was the name of the thought problem made popular in recreational mathematics by Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick and who was its original creator and what was his scientific area of study?”

“Newcomb’s paradox, named after its creator, physicist William Newcomb,” she told him. “Anyone who’s ever been to quiz night at the Queen’s Head knows the answer to that one. Now are you going to tell us about Miranda or what?”

“Since when do you speak Russian?” Oliver asked suddenly.

“What?” She asked, turning to look at him in confusion. “I don’t speak Russian.”

“Baby, you were speaking Russian,” Bruce said slowly. “Just now.”

“Not to mention French, Arabic, Japanese, and some other language I don’t know,” Tam added.
“Tokelauan,” Savant offered before giving Felicity a look of grudging respect, “I must say, I am impressed. Not even Oracle would have gotten that one.”

The table fell silent and Felicity shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She saw J’onn give her a curious but sympathetic look before clearing her throat and turning back to Savant, “I played your game, now who is Miranda and how is she connected to Bruce?”

He took on a sullen expression, “I know I said I’d tell you but when I do all my fun will end.”

“Goddamn it…” Bruce growled threateningly.

“Mr. Savant, you promised,” the large Russian reminded him with a gentle scold.

“Very well then,” he sighed. “He knows her the same way the Canary does; through the League of Assassins.”

“Miranda was League?” Sara asked in confusion.

“But she hates the League,” Felicity objected.

“Of course she does,” he harrumphed. “She’s been at war with Ra’s and her sister for years over who’ll take control eventually and, after their father began to favor Nyssa, she completely lost it. After all, Talia always did subscribe to the ‘if I can’t have it, no one can’ school of thought,” he said dryly. “She’s quite predictable in that way.”

“Talia?” Bruce said in shock.

“Miranda Tate is Talia al Ghul?” Sara asked, looking equally stunned.

“Talia’s dead,” Dick said stone-faced. “I saw her die myself and not even a Lazarus Pit can bring you back once you take a bullet to the brain!”

“I don’t know how she did it but she did,” Savant shrugged. “She even reached out to me a few times after her latest ‘resurrection’. When the League started coming after me a few months ago, she offered up her safe house which I took simply because all our other bolt holes had been burned somehow.” His mouth tightened, “Now I suspect I know who was doing the burning, although I have no idea why Talia would turn on me like this. She seemed so much saner after being lobotomized by a bullet then brought back to life.” He rolled his eyes, “Oh well, just goes to show you can’t trust anyone these days.”

And at that, Felicity pretty much gave up on the possibility of finishing her dinner much less dessert.

Sometime later they were all gathered around the living room listening intently as Savant and Creote began to fill in the gaps.

“Talia paid me to provide her with information on various companies and people,” he shrugged. “It was easy work, nothing too trying; not for me anyway, and she paid well. Besides, even though I have a policy of not getting involved with Ra’s al Ghul and his associates, she didn’t really ask a lot and it’s not like we had a lot of contact with each other, plus she technically wasn’t in the League anymore, so I had no real objections to taking her money. It started, um…” He looked to Creote questioninglly.

“Almost two years ago,” the larger man provided.
“What kind of information was she looking for?” Felicity asked as Bruce sat silent and stone faced beside her.

He hadn’t spoken a word since Savant had revealed Miranda’s true identity and it was really beginning to worry her.

“Random things really,” he told her. “Mostly she wanted information on you,” he said looking towards Oliver.

“Me?” He asked with a scowl, “I’ve never even met Talia. The only one I’ve had any real contact with is Nyssa.”

“Like I said, I don’t know why she wanted it, she just did. She also wanted me to call in a favor with a broker I know in order to arrange a meeting between Isabel Rochev and herself. After Slade was sent on that semi-permanent tropical vacation ARGUS arranged for him, Miranda took control of Stellmoor and she and Isabel formed Orbital.”

“Was Isabel the one to put a hit out on Felicity?” Oliver bit out. At Savant’s frown he added, “Eighteen months ago someone arranged a hit on Felicity through an anonymous broker that was canceled suddenly.”

“I have no idea but I will say that my acquaintance has been known to arrange such things but he, like myself, has a policy against getting involved with League business,” he paused, “Although he would arrange jobs for Deathstroke from time to time even though he freelanced for the League occasionally, so who knows. I do know that Isabel used him almost exclusively so if she did arrange a hit then he’s who she would have used.”

“His name,” Bruce growled.

“You know, I really don’t appreciate being treated like this, Bruce,” Savant said lightly. “Especially since I’ve given you all this valuable information and have yet to see how my telling you anything benefits me. After all, I would be burning a valuable contact; what incentive would I have to do something like that?”

“How about we don’t rearrange your face like a Picasso,” Wildcat asked. “That enough of an incentive for you, smart ass?”

“Not really,” he said with a maddening smirk.

“Brian, you strike me as a fairly smart guy, so think it through,” Felicity said, causing the man to turn to her with raised eyebrows. “Don’t you find it odd that Miranda, I’m sorry, Talia,” she corrected, “sent our team in to collect you at the exact same time that the League and ARGUS both happened to descend on your location? Without us helping you, it seems to me that you’re pretty much out of friends.”

“You think she planned that?” Katana asked. “But why; what would be her motivation if it was her team and her safe house in the first place?”

“And why betray Mr. Savant?” Creote added curiously.

“Stop fraternizing with the enemy,” the other man told his bodyguard. “Talking to these women just encourages them to ask more questions.”

“Why do you stay with this guy, seriously?” Tam asked, looking to Creote. “I mean, I get it; he’s cute, but he’s not all that and a bag of chips.”
“I am still not understanding what you are saying to me,” Creote said slowly.

Savant frowned at her as well, “You’re not alone, mate. I don’t believe I’ll ever understand these women,” he murmured to his companion. “Nothing they say seems to make any sense at all. It’s quite honestly like being in hell, plus that one,” he said nodding towards Felicity with a disgruntled expression, “called me ‘Brian’. I hate that,” he muttered. “My father used to call me ‘Brian’ in the exact same way. It’s like he went to hell then made a deal with Satan to have these irritating women torment me.”

“I believe, Mr. Savant, that you may very well be correct and that they were sent to us by the devil,” he concurred. “That one’s sister keeps talking to me about some kind of program on the cellular phone she wants me to use she called ‘Grindr’.”

“I think that we’re missing something but, yes, I believe she set us up; why I have no idea,” Felicity told them before turning once again to Savant, “You said you thought Talia spread the rumor about you to ARGUS and the League; why?”

“I told you, I don’t know,” he said in exasperation.

“Guess.”

He let out a harsh breath, “I have no idea, honestly. Unless, of course, she was trying to tie up loose ends because I knew Bruce and that she was alive, but then why would she send her own team after me to bring me to Gotham if she didn’t want him to know about it? After all, if you people hadn’t dragged us all the way from Siberia to the dinner party from hell, he would’ve hunted me down the first chance he got!”

“Damn right,” Bruce bit out.

“Maybe that’s why she did it,” Alfred mused.

“What do you mean?” Dick asked with a frown.

“Well, from what I’ve observed so far, she seems to have drawn together both Mr. Queen’s and the Batman’s teams together through this Orbital Organization by filling it with people who are connected with both your missions, yes?”

“Miranda said she did that for me,” Felicity said slowly. “She said she picked people she knew I would trust.”

“And who would trust you, as well as both the Arrow and the Bat,” Alfred pointed out.

“Sonia and I had never met with either of these men or their teams before today,” Barda objected.

“Yeah, but you guys said you’d never been to the Gotham facility before, that you just happened to stop by, and none of us were supposed to be there the night we met,” Laurel told them.

“She is right,” Sonia agreed. “Your meeting us was simply divine happenstance then.”

“What about you guys?” Luke asked Booster and Ted. “How are you connected to the missions?”

“Um, well, we both worked with ARGUS,” Booster shrugged.

“And OMAC,” Ted pointed out.

“You worked for QC’s Applied Sciences division?” Oliver said with a frown.
“For a while anyway,” Booster shrugged.

“Until we got fired when they scrapped the project,” Ted said dryly. “Then we got hired by Palmer/Garret so we could continue working on OMAC there.”

“Wait, why was Palmer/Garret working on our OMAC project?” Oliver demanded.

“I don’t know, I guess Miss Rochev sold it to them,” Booster shrugged.

“Isabel sold top secret weapons tech to one of our competitors?” Oliver growled.

Felicity sighed, “Focus Oliver; we can deal with the corporate espionage stuff later.”

“Besides, it’s not like they have it anymore,” Ted told him.

“What do you mean?” Bruce asked them.

“Booster and I kind of, um….” Ted’s voice trailed off.

“You and Booster kind of did what?” Wildcat asked suspiciously.

“Stole it,” Booster shrugged.

“You stole highly classified weapons tech?” Oliver asked incredulously.

“Not exactly,” Ted told him sheepishly. “More like we took a prototype out for a spin and sort of didn’t bring it back since we got fired anyway.”

Bruce turned to her with a scowl, “Who are these people again?”

“Oh, sorry; Ted, Ted Kord,” Ted said, extending a hand towards him. “We’ve actually met before; you’re friends with my dad and my uncle.”

“You’re Ted Kord III,” Bruce repeated slowly without bothering to take his proffered hand, “The one who tried blowing up WayneTech’s R&D lab?”

“I didn’t actually *try* to blow it up, it was an accident,” he said with a grimace.

“And you’re both masks?” Oliver asked looking between the two dubiously.

“Yeah, well, um, sort of,” Booster shrugged. “I mean, we do have the suit, we just haven’t quite finished it yet.”

Oliver’s mouth tightened in consternation, “You’re still working on OMAC on your own?”

“No, I mean, not OMAC,” Ted assured him. “Ray Palmer redesigned that into a new thing he calls A.T.O.M. even though it’s totally based on OMAC; no, what Booster and I are doing with it is much more streamlined and is more of a flight suit than offensive battle armor.”

“My background is mostly in aeronautics,” Booster explained.

“So you both have suits that fly?” Luke asked, his interest peaked.

“No, well, technically Booster does but we’re still working out some bugs,” Ted admitted. “Plus, we made it to his specifications since, at the time, I was a little overweight and I didn’t want to build my own suit until after I went on a diet.”
“A diet?” Dick repeated, scratching the back of his neck.

“I’ve lost over a hundred and fifty pounds since last January,” Ted said proudly. He looked to Bruce, “That’s probably why you didn’t recognize me.”

“Right,” Bruce nodded, blank faced.

“You lost a hundred and fifty pounds in a little over a year?” Lyla asked him.

Renee shook her head in disbelief, “How?”

He began ticking them off with his fingers, “Well, first I did Atkins but living completely without carbs got to be too much. Then I tried Weight Watchers but I was still hungry all the time, so then I went to the South Beach Diet which is a compromise between the two and that did the trick.”

“Remind me to pick up a copy of that book,” Renee told Laurel.

“Your ass is gorgeous, stop,” she told her then froze as Sara and Renee both gave her funny looks. “Not that I’ve been looking or anything,” she said quickly.

“You like my ass, huh?” Renee said smugly as Laurel blushed, “Good to know.”

Sara’s eyes twinkled in amusement as she looked at her sister’s uncharacteristic flush, “We’re talking about this later; you know that, right?”

“Just shut up,” Laurel told both of them.

“Anyway, like I said, it’s not even close to OMAC anymore so you have nothing to worry about,” Ted assured them.

“It’s not even like Palmer’s design either,” Booster added. “Not since we improved it.”

“Improved it how?” Oliver asked, his jaw still tight at the thought of having his company’s project sold out from under him without his knowledge, even if it had been shelved.

“Well…” Ted began, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, “See, between me and Booster, we’ve worked at a lot of places…”

“Him more than me,” Booster said hitching his thumb towards his partner.

Ted shifted his weight slightly, “And every once in a while there would be these projects just lying around that no one was actually using…”

“Like all that tech ARGUS had that was just gathering dust,” Booster muttered.

“You’re a couple of thieves?” Gypsy said with a snort.

“We’re not thieves,” Ted said quickly. “We didn’t actually *steal* anything.”

“Except the suit,” Booster added reluctantly.

“Yeah, but that was totally on accident.”

His partner nodded in agreement, “Yeah, and, like Ted said, it was just old junk no one else was interested in so it was less like stealing and more like recycling.”
“Yeah, we were just being good environmentalists!” The smaller man insisted.

“Well, I think that’s cool as hell. Now I wish I had grabbed some shit before I left ARGUS,” Mordred said, looking between the two and holding out a fist. “Right on, dudes! Fight the power and damn the man!” Both men gave him a bump and grinned back.

“Yes, but *I’m* the man,” Oliver grumbled. “It was my company that was robbed.”

“Oh, just suck it up, Ollie! You would have lost that thing anyway after you guys blew up the Applied Sciences building, remember? So stop whining,” Laurel said rolling her eyes at him.

“It—” He narrowed his eyes at her then grumbled under his breath, “It’s the principle of the matter.”

“Ah, the Applied Sciences Building; I haven’t thought of that in a while. That was a fun day,” Sara said reminiscently. “Remember that, Cutie? You were so nervous because it was your plan and you kept worrying about getting the math wrong.” She sighed, “God, you looked so adorable in your little knit cap and tactical gear; I just wanted to gobble you up!”

“I remember,” she nodded, her own mouth curving into a smile.

“I was so proud of you, too!” She turned to Luke, “You should have seen your sister. She walked right into the foundry, looked us in the eye, and said, ‘So I’ve been thinking about blowing up the Applied Sciences Building; who’s with me?’ Just like that.” She turned to look at her warmly, “Between that and her taking a bullet for me, I was a goner. Head over heels in lust.”


“Yes, I was so nervous.” Felicity said ignoring Luke as she offered Sara a teasing smile of her own, “Our first explosion together. You sprang for burgers afterwards and bought me a chocolate mint milkshake.”

“The first ‘let’s go blow some shit up’ victory celebration of many,” Laurel mused, turning to Renee. “Of course, I wasn’t there for that one but I was for the rest of them. My favorite will always be the time we took out that Triad warehouse full of heroin—”

“Oh, yeah, the fireworks factory!” Lyla jumped in. “Oh man, that was awesome!”

“It was like the Fourth of July,” Felicity grinned despite the dirty looks the men were shooting them.

“Bombs bursting in air with those big Disney World sparkler things,” Sara said happily.

“Even dad got a little choked up about that one…even though we accidently took out half the docks,” Laurel chuckled.

Lyla nodded eagerly, “And afterwards Thea made us go back to Verdant for shots!”

“Redheaded Sluts!” All four women said at the same time.

“Damn, now I want to do that,” Gypsy breathed.

“I must admit that does sound fun,” Katana agreed, her lips curving upwards slightly.

“I think Barda and I would both enjoy that as well,” Sonia said, looking to her partner for confirmation.

“I do enjoy a good victory celebration,” the much larger woman agreed.
“They’re insane,” Savant intoned as he looked to his bodyguard who merely nodded in agreement.

Sara’s eyes twinkled, “We should do that again sometime, maybe after our Fred and Ginger Girl’s Night. It’s been a while since we blew some shit up then went for burgers and shots afterwards.”

“Renee could probably get us some charges,” Laurel offered.

“Yeah, I think I could find some C-4 lying around somewhere,” Renee nodded.

Lyla nodded in agreement, “I have a couple of grenades and a rocket launcher I could contribute to the cause.”

“Oh man, I love it when you use the rocket launcher; you’re like a surgeon with that thing,” Sara praised the other woman. “Even if you did use it to blow up my crib that one time.”

“It died a noble death though,” Felicity said, offering her friend a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

“I want to blow some stuff up, too!” Tam said eagerly.

“Can the guys get in on the action or is this a girl’s only deal?” Mordred asked from where he was sitting next to Gypsy, his arm thrown around her shoulder. “Because, if you let me tag along, I could do some hacking and find a couple of stash houses as targets.”

“Sure,” Sara shrugged. “The more the merrier.”

“Explosions do always make a bad night better,” Helena hummed.

“Hey, and that girl bar I was talking about has a pretty decent restaurant on the lower level. We could eat, then go for shots afterwards,” Felicity offered.

“Goddamn, I love this team,” Renee grinned.

“Also, if Mordred can’t find us something, Bruce has a lot of shit we could blow up instead,” Laurel told them.

“He does have a lot of unnecessary shit,” Renee agreed.

“No one is blowing anything up!” Bruce burst out, his patience obviously at a tipping point.

“Aw, c’mon, Bruce! You blow things up all the time!” Renee said, leaning back in her seat with a smirk. “The least you could do is spread the love.”

“You do get a little happy with the missiles sometimes,” Dick told him then backtracked as soon as Bruce gave him a deadly look. “Alrighty then,” he cleared his throat. “But you guys are masks?” Dick asked, turning his attention back to Booster and Ted and away from the ‘let’s blow shit up’ girl talk.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Booster shrugged.

“No, they aren’t,” Helena scoffed. “They’re a couple of security guards!”

“What?” Bruce turned to Felicity with an annoyed expression on his face, “You exposed all of our identities to a couple of security guards?” His jaw tightened and he glared at her, “What is it with you and security guards anyway?”

“Hey, I—“ Felicity began.
“We’re more than just security guards!” Ted objected.

“Yeah,” Booster said joining him. “If we were ‘just’ security guards then Director Starling wouldn’t have made us Birds, too, right?”

Both men looked to Felicity who stared back at them like a deer in headlights before answering.

“Ummm….um hmm,” she nodded slowly.

Bruce gave her another death glare before speaking, “So that means everyone, with the exception of…?” He turned to the other two Orbital operators with a questioning look.

“Big Barda and Judomaster,” Barda supplied.

He nodded as if filing that away, “So all of you are somehow connected to both our missions, but why would Talia drag all of you into this? Why not just come after me directly?”

“What makes you think you’re the target?” Sara asked. “Seems to me that she spent more time and effort getting into Oliver’s company than she did with going after you, plus I was involved with her sister. For all we know she could have been going after the Arrow or this whole thing was a set up to get me to join Felicity at Orbital so she could lead us into that trap.”

“You think you were the target?” Bruce asked her as if considering that.

“She has a point,” Katana agreed. “Had we followed the instructions we had been given instead of reformulating the plan ourselves, we would have been caught in a turkey shoot between both the League and ARGUS.”

“It’s a theory anyway,” Sara shrugged. “And if she had managed to take me out using League members then that would cause a huge rift between Nyssa and Ra’s and splinter the League right down the middle.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Lyla said slowly. “Same thing with me and ARGUS. If I had gotten taken out by ARGUS agents that would have set Johnny off after Waller again and lead to a break down in communications between Team Arrow and Trevor.”

“But what about the rest of us?” Gypsy asked. “Were the rest of us just there as collateral damage then?”

“And why bring Batman into it if this was all about Team Arrow?” Katana added.

“And why use me as bait because I don’t really have anything to do with any of you people,” Savant said sourly.

“Perhaps it’s not about either of your teams,” J’onn said quietly, speaking up at long last.

Felicity turned to look at him, “What do you mean?”

“Perhaps neither the Arrow nor the Batman is the primary target, perhaps the target is you,” he told her.

“Why would she go after Felicity?” Oliver asked with a frown. “You think Isabel is trying to get revenge for Slade or something?”

“Perhaps,” he said. “It just struck me as odd that all of this seems more centered around her then either of you. After all, Miranda, or Talia rather, specifically told Felicity that she designed the team
“That was just one of Talia’s lies,” Bruce said immediately. “No, if anyone is the target, it’s me. It’s always been me. She’s spent years trying to either kill or seduce me and she even had our son killed for the sole purpose of hurting me.”

“You two had a son together?” Lyla asked, her brow furrowing in sympathy.

“Damian,” he nodded. “She put a bounty on his head then sent in one of her ‘soldiers’ to kill him.”

“I’m sorry,” she said taking a pained breath, “I know what it’s like to lose a child.”

Bruce nodded, “Thank you, and I’m sorry for your loss as well. I spoke to your ex-husband and he mentioned something about how you managed to survive a HIVE attack but that you miscarried.”

“I didn’t miscarry,” she told him. “My daughter was cut out of me and I was left to bleed out.” She tightened her jaw, “We never found her body either.”

“Are you sure she died?” Dick broke in quietly. “Not to upset you, but maybe it was a case of kidnapping?”

“We thought of that.” She sucked in a pained breath, her face darkening, “I was far enough along that she could have survived outside of the womb, nearly thirty weeks along, but we sent out alerts to all of the NICUs within a five hundred mile radius and none of them reported receiving a pre-term infant at or around her gestational age. We even sent out DNA swabs but nothing. It’s like she disappeared off the face of the planet.”

J’onn frowned at that, “And you are absolutely convinced that HIVE were the ones who stole your unborn child?” He asked her.

“Yeah,” she said.

“That doesn’t make sense,” he turned to Felicity. “There would be absolutely no reason for the Korilites to steal a fetus.”

“Korilites?” Lyla repeated with an edge of confused anger coloring her tone before she looked to Felicity. “What the hell is he talking about?”

“Yeah,” she said slowly then sighed. “There is *so* much that I need to brief you guys on, especially you and Oliver,” she said, meeting his eyes briefly before turning back to Lyla, “and, I swear to you, we’ll get to that, I promise. For now though, let’s just get through this then maybe we can go back into the kitchen for cold leftovers and pie while J’onn explains what he needs to explain.” She tilted her head back and forth uncertainly, “But hopefully not after he gets high on cookies and starts licking the dog while naked.”

Everyone not in on the joke just stared at her while the ones who got it wore expressions that ran the gamut from mild irritation to barely contained hilarity.

“She just said that the policeman licked a dog while naked, didn’t she?” Savant asked his bodyguard slowly.

Creote nodded, “She did, sir; although I was hoping I misunderstood.”

“Do I even want to hear about this?” Sara asked, turning to Laurel.
Her sister blew out a slow breath, “Uh, you…just had to be there.”

“That shit is still funny,” Renee chuckled. “Terrifying as fuck, but funny.”

“Moving on,” Oliver said giving them a longsuffering look, “Going back to J’onn’s theory; I take it that you think that this Talia is going after Felicity because, why? Her relationship with Wayne?”

“I couldn’t say,” he told him. “I just got the sense that perhaps given that Felicity seemed to be targeted specifically that this was more about her than anyone else.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Bruce said shaking his head. “Talia wouldn’t even know who Felicity is or that she was ever connected to my mission. No one knew about our relationship before she left Gotham four years ago and Orbital was investigating her before we started seeing each other again.”

Alfred spoke up, “That’s not true, sir.”

“What do you mean?” Bruce asked.

“Four years ago, before Miss Felicity left, everyone in the team either knew or sensed there was some sort of attraction between the two of you,” he said simply.

“Alfred’s right,” Dick admitted. “Even if you two didn’t notice, we all did.” He turned to Alfred, “I hope that you’re not implying that one of *us* leaked that information however.”

“That’s exactly what I’m implying,” the butler intoned.

“Alfred, man, I’m sorry, but no one on the team would’ve said anything,” Dick objected. “Besides Bruce and Felicity, it was just me, you, Barbara, and Tim in the Cave, remember?”

Instead of refuting him, the elder man looked to Bruce, “I take it that your relationship with Miss Felicity began in earnest just before she left?”

“Yes,” Bruce answered carefully.

“Which falls during the period of time when Master Damian disappeared,” He said simply.

Bruce and Dick both exchanged looks.

“You think Damian told his mother about Felicity,” Bruce said darkly.

“We all believed at the time that he returned to her side after leaving us,” he agreed.

“Why would he do that?” Dick said doubtfully.

“He would do it if he thought Talia would go after her,” Bruce answered for him.

Dick shook his head, “Why would--?”

Alfred stopped him, “If you’ll recall, Master Damian was highly territorial when it came to Master Bruce’s affections. In addition to trying to kill Master Tim on several occasions, he also attempted to poison Miss Felicity just before he disappeared, therefore it makes perfect sense that he would tell his mother if he felt that his father’s affections for Miss Felicity superseded the feelings he had towards her,” Alfred told him.

“Wait, your kid tried to kill Felicity?” Oliver broke in.
“Damian was…difficult,” Bruce said, his eyes cast towards the floor.

“Why didn’t you tell me he tried to poison Felicity?” Dick asked with a hint of anger.

“I handled it, besides it wouldn’t have made a difference,” Bruce told him, his face gone emotionless and cold, signaling the amount of pain he was in at that moment.

Without even thinking about it, she placed her hand over his and spoke, “None of that is important right now. What is important is that if I was the one being targeted, then why not just kill me or let the hitman finish the job eighteen months ago?”

“She has a point,” Renee agreed. “None of this makes a whole hell of a lot of sense.”

Sara frowned, “You said that Isabel was constantly accusing you of being the office slut, right?”

Felicity pulled a face, “Yeah; up until she decided I was gay and started trying to get into my pants instead.”

“Really?” Ted squawked.

Booster’s eyebrows rose towards his hairline and he grinned, “Nice.”

“Dude, that’s my sister,” Luke said, pinning the other man with a glare.

Renee reached over and smacked Booster on the back of the head, “That’s right, Buster; show some respect.”


“When did Talia first get mixed up with Stellmoor again? Eighteen months ago, maybe?” Sara asked, looking to Savant and Creote.

Savant looked to Creote who answered for him, “I believe that may be correct, yes.”

“So you think Talia put the hold on the hit and not Isabel?” Felicity asked in confusion. “But why? Why would she want to protect me?”

“Not protect you, use you as bait,” Bruce said suddenly then turned his fiery gaze towards Helena, “The broker who told you about the hit on Felicity; was he the same one who fed you the information on the safe house?”

“Yeah,” Helena said uneasily. “But it can’t be the same guy.”

“Why not?” Oliver asked in a hard tone.

“Because you guys said that the hit was cancelled over eighteen months ago.”

“Helena was in prison eighteen months ago,” Felicity said, catching on.

Sara turned to her as well, “So when did he tell you about the contract?”

“The same time he gave me the information about the safe house,” Helena said, understanding dawning. “He even tossed it in as a freebie because the client wanted me to be the shooter specifically.”

“And you didn’t say anything?” Bruce growled.
“You had your hand wrapped around my throat!” Helena reminded him. “Pardon me for not wanting to get chatty! Besides, I told you, I don’t do contracts and everyone knows that. He thought I might make an exception because of her connection to the Arrow but I turned him down.”

“How long after that did Orbital contact you?” Felicity asked, ignoring the looks the two of them were shooting each other.

“The next day,” she answered in a growl. “So that means that Miranda, Talia, whatever that bitch’s name is, used me just to spring a trap?”

“Yeah, but how could they know the LAIR hardware would ping Watchtower or that you’d be patrolling that specific area?” Felicity asked in confusion.

“The safe house was located near the East End which is the Bat’s primary hunting grounds,” Bruce answered darkly. “As for Watchtower, that could have merely been coincidence.”

“I don’t think so,” Oliver contradicted looking at Helena. “How often have you used the tech you lifted from the Lair?”

“A lot,” she admitted reluctantly. “But if that was the case then why didn’t it trigger an alert thingie before then?”

“Because it was designed to ping a LAIR system and the only other system out there based on the same design as LAIR is Watchtower,” Felicity answered, her gut tightening.

“And both Watchtower and LAIR are based on that article you published back at MIT,” Luke added, his expression matching hers. “Anyone investigating you could have found that since it’s pretty much the only thing out there with your name in print.”

If LAIR is what led to all of this then that meant...

She rubbed the bridge of her nose and paled.

He turned to Felicity, “Isabel told you they’d been watching us for a while, long enough to get a sense of how we work. What if they were keeping an eye on all of us, every one of our known associates including Helena?”

“Master Damian always seemed very interested in how Watchtower was configured,” Alfred added as he looked to Bruce.

“And both systems were based on my design using the same programming language,” Felicity said as the taste of bile rose in her throat and swallowed. “I did this; all of this is my fault.”

“No, it’s not,” Alfred assured her.

“He’s right,” Bruce said, running a comforting hand down her back despite the anger in his eyes, “The only people at fault here are Talia and Isabel Rochev.”

“By why go to all this damn trouble?” Wildcat asked. “This whole thing is so tangled and twisted it’s like a friggin’ spider web or something out of an old Bond movie.”

Creote leaned forward, his own brow furrowed in quiet contemplation, “And why would she send Mr. Savant and myself to Siberia when it would have made much more sense to spring this trap here in Gotham or in Starling City?”
“Ley lines,” Bruce answered him.

Lyla gave him a dubious look, “Say what now?”

“Lazarus Pits, right?” Oliver said. “You told me that Lake Baikal had one of those Vile Vortices.”

Bruce nodded slowly as he propped his elbows on his knees and tapped his lips with his fingers, “This wasn’t just a trap for me or you, it was a spider web like Wildcat said.” He looked up at Oliver, “They drew our two teams together to get our attention then brought them to Lake Baikal to, I suspect, gain Ra’s attention because it’s the location of a Lazarus Pit.”

Oliver shook his head, “I’m still not following you.”

“I believe I am,” Alfred said. “If I’m correct then your theory is that, had Miss Felicity’s team died in Lake Baikal, then you and Mr. Queen would have gone there to investigate. As Ra’s may or may not suspect both of you have a role to play in his ‘prophesy’, this would attract his attention as well as that of Nyssa should Miss Lance have died.”

“She was trying to draw out Ra’s and Nyssa, as well as get the two of you, all in the same place at around the same time,” Dick breathed.

“The ultimate revenge against her father as well as me,” Bruce nodded. “Even if Ra’s didn’t show, with both Queen and myself dead, then he can never get his ‘heir’.”

Dick shook his head in disbelief, “Still, while Talia’s schemes were always pretty elaborate, they’ve never been this intricate before. Plus, she’s always been kind of quick on the trigger; why wait this long to spring all this on us? Why not do it a year ago or even six months ago? Why now?”

“Perhaps her latest death taught Ms. al Ghul the art of patience.” Alfred tented his fingers before speaking again, “I suspect that she stopped Ms. Rochev from having Miss Felicity killed for that very reason; she needed time to plan and to set everything up.”

“Plus, there’s the Miller thing,” Felicity said quietly. “When you think about it, it’s the perfect distraction. It’s like slight of hand; keep your focus on this hand while dealing from the bottom of the deck with the other.”

“She’s right,” Oliver nodded. “Think about it: If her plan had succeeded, she would have taken both of us down plus several of our assets, messed with ARGUS and the League, beaten her father at his own game, taken out her sister, plus pocketed a pretty impressive payday at the end of the day since Stellmoor owns 50% of QC and, once I died, they could buy up the rest.”

“So why use me to do all this and why use another broker to pull it all together?” Savant asked them in a bored tone even though his eyes were sharp and alert to everything being said.

“Same reason; money,” Laurel told him. “You said it yourself; you’re the best, right? With you out of the way then her guy, this other broker, would probably be in the number one spot, right?”

He and Creote traded looks, “Max always was a bit greedy, not to mention jealous of my success.”

“Max?” Bruce asked sharply.

“Maxwell Lord,” Savant said coldly. “Consider that a gift; happy hunting.”

Oliver and Sara exchanged looks.
“Feel like going on a little manhunt after all this is over with, Ollie?” She asked.

“I think that can be arranged,” he said icily.

“So now we go after Rochev and get her to reveal where Talia is holed up, right?” Dick asked, his own expression a mask of hatred.

“Yes,” Bruce growled.

“No,” Felicity told him.

“Why the hell not?” He asked her with hard eyes.

“If you go after Isabel then Talia will know you’ve figured it out and go underground again,” she explained patiently.

“That shouldn’t be that much of a surprise though,” Katana objected. “Once her plan to have us die in Siberia fell through, she should have anticipated that we would begin to piece it all together eventually.”

“Not necessarily,” she said shaking her head. “The one thing she kept saying to me time and time again was that male masks were territorial and didn’t work well together,” she reminded her. “She was banking on the fact that neither Oliver nor Bruce would ever team up in a million years. Also, and I suspect that Isabel helped her with this part, they were kind of banking on me either being a bubbleheaded naïf or that I’d be too caught up in relationship drama to communicate any of this to either of them.”

“Isabel always did underestimate you,” Oliver said with a proud smirk.

“Yeah, well, remember this the next time you decide to clam up and go it alone,” she told him. “Teamwork plus open communication equals us not getting dead.”

Oliver’s lips tightened as he gave her a disgruntled look.

“That goes for you, too,” she said looking to Bruce. “See what happens when you not only work as a team but actually let people think things through without taking control and going off on a power trip?”

“Point made,” he said bad-humoredly. “So how do you propose we take down Talia if we don’t go after Rochev? You said yourself that she’s constantly on the move.”

“If she’s spent as much time planning this thing as we think, then she’s probably made some contingency plans,” she pointed out. “She told me the other day that she intended to re-group and try again; chances are she’ll show up again sooner rather than later so all we have to do is keep playing this the way we have been.”

“You want to go back into Orbital,” Oliver said flatly.

“No,” Bruce said firmly.

“Hear me out,” she said looking between the two of them. “Now that we know who we’re dealing with here, as soon as she steps inside of Orbital we can take her down.”

“It’s too risky,” Bruce said, shaking his head.

“No, she’s right,” Sara told them. “Now that we’re all on the same page, it’s just a matter of waiting
“until she shows up.”

Oliver shook his head, “I don’t like it; our safest bet is just to take down Isabel.”

Bruce nodded, “Queen’s right.”

Felicity sighed, “Look, let’s compromise; Isabel is planning on being my plus one for the Gala on Saturday—” Bruce started to object again but she cut him off by placing her hand on his chest comfortably, “I’ll be perfectly safe; you’ll be there and so will Oliver, plus the rest of the team.”

“The rest of the team?” Dick frowned.

“You mean all of us?” Sara asked her.

“Yes, why not? Tam can get you all in, right?” She said looking to her sister.

“Absolutely,” Tam nodded.

“We split into thirds; some of us go to the Gala to keep watch on Isabel, some stay at Orbital to hold down the fort, and the rest stand guard with Creote and Savant.”

“No,” Savant said quickly. “Creote and I are leaving; this is your problem, not ours.”

“Talia is still gunning for you along with the League and ARGUS,” Felicity said reasonably.

“Then let them come,” Savant told her. “In the meantime, Creote and I will be hunting down Max in order to thank him for his part in all of this.”

Again, Oliver and Bruce both looked like they wanted to object but she spoke first, “If you want to go then that’s your choice; I just assumed you’d want to be there when we took down Talia.”

Savant paused at that as if considering her words carefully, “As your prisoners?”

“There’s the door,” she told him for what felt like the umpteenth time. “However, if you do stay then you’ll need to remain out of sight which means you’ll have to stay here at the penthouse for the time being.”

“No. No way,” Bruce said adamantly. “There is no way in hell these two are living here.”

“Where else are they going to go?” She asked him. “The manor? Orbital? This apartment is the most secure place there is at the moment.”

“She’s right, sir,” Alfred agreed.

“I don’t give a damn, they aren’t staying here!” He growled.

Savant smirked, “Here sounds perfect now that I think about it.”

“You’re not staying here,” Bruce turned to him, his fists clenched and his eyes narrowed. “I’ll arrange for another safe house; one far away from here!”

“Be reasonable,” Felicity said, her eyebrows drawing together in frustration. “It makes perfect sense for them to just stay put!”

“I don’t want them staying in the penthouse,” he said stubbornly. “Not only don’t I want them anywhere near the alternate Batcave but I also don’t want them anywhere near you!”
“Okay, so I secure the Watchtower terminal and some of the other Birds can move in here in order to keep watch.”

“They’d still be living here with you!”

“Then I’ll move into the manor,” she told him. “It’s what you wanted me to do anyway, right?” From the corner of her eye she saw Oliver’s expression darken but she kept her attention focused on Bruce. “I’ll pack some suitcases and we’ll head over there tonight.”

She could see his determination wavering before he let out a disgruntled sigh, “Fine.”

“Sara and I are already living here and Renee could stay on, right?” Laurel said, turning to the other woman.

“Sure, no problem,” Renee shrugged.

“I could stay,” Helena shrugged. “Beats living in that crappy Orbital hotel anyway.”

Bruce scowled, “There’s—!” Felicity shot him a look, “Fine!” He bit out, “Why not just have your entire team move in then?”

“Yes,” Luke chuckled. “You could rename the place ‘The Bird’s Nest’ since you’d all be roomies together.”

“That’s a good idea actually,” Tam said brightly. “I mean, there is that big tree in the atrium and this is the penthouse so ‘The Bird’s Nest’ kind of fits.”

“The Bird’s Nest,” Lyla nodded, her features beginning to relax once more. “I like it.”

“All of our suitcases are still downstairs,” Gypsy pointed out.

“Plus, whatever clothes you don’t have, I can get from either my storage units or the wardrobe department where I work,” Tam assured them. “Ooh! We could head over there tomorrow!” She looked at Creote and Savant, “I can probably look around for stuff for you guys, too.” She pointed to Savant, “You I can probably fit easy, but you…” she wrinkled her nose, “Eh, we’ll see, but chances are I’m going to have to make a run to the Big and Tall department. Just give me your sizes and I’ll pick up some stuff tomorrow. Baby, do you still have Bruce’s card?”

“You’re not getting my credit card,” Bruce told her then caught the look on Felicity’s face then growled, “Just—just call down to Killinger’s and tell them to put it on my account.”

“Thank you, Bruce; jolly good of you to be such a sport about all this,” Savant said cheerily causing the other man to gnash his teeth together in response. “So how many bedrooms are in this place anyway?” He asked looking around.

“Seven,” Felicity told them.

“Um, that might be a problem,” Laurel said, looking around the group.

“Sonia and I will remain at Orbital,” Barda told them. “All of our things are still there anyway.”

“Still, that means somebody’s going to have to double up,” Laurel pointed out.

“I could share,” Renee offered, waggling her eyebrows and causing her to snicker.

“Sara and I will share but thanks,” she said dryly.
“Now you’re just playing hard to get,” Renee sighed.

“Actually, it is not necessary for any of you ladies to give up your beds,” Creote assured them. “Mr. Savant and I can share a room.”

All of the women zeroed in on them.

“Really?” Sara asked slowly. “And why is that exactly?”

“I prefer to be close in case he needs me in the night,” he said easily.

“Uh huh,” she said.

“I guess you guys can have our room then,” Felicity told them as Bruce glowered at her. She sighed, “It’s not like we’ll need it, plus, look at them; they kind of need the bigger bed.”

“Yeah, they do,” Lyla said, looking them up and down.

“Fine,” he said once again in a tone that, had she not already been paying attention, screamed ‘not a happy camper’. “Let’s just get your things and go.”

“I’ll have to change the sheets first before we can leave,” she said with a frown. “Plus J’onn still needs to brief the rest of the team.”

“I can take care of preparing the room for Mr. Creote and Mr. Savant, then pack up some of your things if you’d like,” Alfred assured her.

“You don’t have to do that,” Felicity told him.

“Nonsense,” he told her. “It will be my pleasure,”

She offered him a grateful smile, “Thanks, Alfred.”

“Not at all, ma’am,” he told her. “Also, while we’re on the subject, I forgot to mention that Mr. Queen’s team from Starling City should be arriving sometime tomorrow.”

Oliver sighed, “Yeah. I’ll call Thea and tell her to just stay put.”

“Actually, sir; it’s too late for that.” Oliver looked up at him in confusion, “Miss Queen called the house earlier this afternoon and I told her it would be best to come early given the amount of traffic that is always present just before the Gala so I sent one of the Wayne Gulfstreams to pick her up along with Master Tim, Detective Lance, and Mr. Diggle. They should be arriving early tomorrow. I’ve already arranged to have rooms prepared for them at the manor.”

“What about Roy and Barbara?” Oliver frowned.

“Mr. Diggle said that your protégé was planning on staying in Starling to run patrols along with someone called ‘Sin’, and Miss Barbara decided to stay in order to run communications.”

“Well, at least your city isn’t being left completely wide open then,” Bruce muttered.

Oliver shot him a dirty look. “Thanks Alfred,” he said, nodding to the butler.

“Not at all, sir,” he said inclining his head in acknowledgement as he got up from his seat and headed towards the master bedroom.
“Full house at the manor,” Dick said quietly. “Sounds like fun.”

“You could always crash at our place,” Luke offered.

“I’m thinking about it,” Dick muttered as he caught the looks being traded back and forth between Bruce and Oliver.

“Okay, um, J’onn,” she said turning to him. “I think you should handle briefing everyone on the HIVE thing since you’re pretty much the expert here.”

“Of course,” he nodded.

“How exactly are you a HIVE expert?” Lyla asked carefully.

“Oh, you guys are gonna love this,” Renee said shaking her head with a grin.

“He’ll tell you all about it in the kitchen. In the meantime, since Oliver and I have already heard it, we need to go step into the office for a minute,” she said, looking to the other man who frowned but nodded.

“Sure,” he said getting up from the couch.

Bruce rose to join them but she placed a hand on his arm, “Actually, I need to speak to Oliver alone, okay?”

He looked between them, “Are you sure?” He asked softly.

She nodded, “Besides, you need to hear what J’onn has to say and you’ll probably have a lot of questions.”


“Okay,” he said before giving Oliver a warning look.

The other man smirked at his expression, “Lead the way,” he said, gesturing for her to go ahead of him.

Bruce caught his arm in a hard grip as he moved past him, “Don’t upset her again and don’t try anything,” he warned in a low tone. “I mean it, Queen.”

He offered him a tight, insincere smile as he deliberately removed his hand from his arm. “Don’t worry, Wayne; chances are she’ll still be your fiancée by the time we make it to the kitchen. Maybe,” he added for good measure before following her out of the room.

As soon as he shut the door to the office behind him, Felicity sighed, “I really hate it when you and Bruce do that macho posturing thing,” she told him.

“It’s just how we communicate,” he said easily. “Besides, I haven’t given up on you yet and it’s important he knows that. You, too,” he told her, his gaze warming considerably.

“Oliver, we need to talk,” she said flushing.

“Look, I know what you’re going to say,” he said, stepping closer until she was just within arm’s reach. “I get that you think I’m not ready for us to have a real chance at a relationship, but--”

“No,” she said quickly. “That’s not what I wanted to tell you.”
“What then?” He asked, his expression growing concerned. “Are you okay?” His lips tightened, “You’re not pregnant are you?”

“No!” She huffed, “Why is that the first thing that springs into everyone’s mind these days?”

“Sorry,” he shrugged. “It’s just that the last two times someone said, ‘Oliver, we need to talk,’ like that it was Sandra telling me she was pregnant and you telling me that Malcolm was Thea’s biological father so that’s automatically the first place my mind goes to.”

“I’m not pregnant,” she assured him, “but you might want to sit down for this anyway.”

“Why?” He asked, tensing up.

She took his hand gently and led him to the leather couch by the bookcases then waited for him to sit before speaking, “You know how I always said I would tell you the truth even if I was afraid of how you would react?”

“What’s going on?” He demanded, his eyes sharpening. “What don’t I know?”

She wet her lips and swallowed, “Um,” she took a deep breath, “I should have told you this earlier but things got kind of crazy and I couldn’t seem to find the right moment--”

“Just tell me,” he said, his eyes softening as he laid a gentle hand against her cheek.

She nodded, “Isabel told me that…” she cleared her throat, “She told me that she and your dad were in a relationship.”

“They were having an affair?” He asked neutrally. She nodded and he let out a slow breath, “Yeah, well, that’s not really a surprise.”

She blinked, “You knew?”

He grimaced, “I suspected,” he admitted. “My mom said some stuff and I knew my dad had affairs, plus every once in a while Isabel would refer to my dad as ‘Robert’ in a way that sounded, well, a little possessive, so yeah.”

“That must have been hard,” she said quietly. “I mean, finding out about your dad cheating on your mom like that. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“It didn’t seem relevant,” he shrugged. His lips curled in disgust, “Plus, there was Russia and that just wasn’t something I wanted to think about.”

She winced, “Yeah, I can see that.”

“Exactly,” he said letting out a humorless chuckle before looking up at her curiously, “Is that it?”

She opened her mouth to speak but stopped, “Um, well, not exactly.”

His eyes searched her face, “What is it?”

“It’s just…she kind of went into details,” she said reluctantly. “A lot of details.” She looked at him, “I’m just not sure how much you really want to know.”

He ran his hand over his mouth and looked at her steadily before speaking, “Is it relevant to the mission in any way?”
“No,” she admitted. “I don’t think so. I mean, she admitted your dad was involved with the League but we knew that. Most of what she told me was personal.”

He nodded, “How personal?”

“The kind of personal that could maybe change the way you think about your dad?” She said reluctantly. “Mostly sexual…stuff.”

He sat back in the couch in silence.

She sat beside him and waited, listening to the tic of the grandfather clock as he took a moment to decide.

She began to count them off in time with her heartbeat.

Tic.

One, two.

Tic.

Three, four.

And so on until he spoke again after several minutes passed.

“Is it like what my mom did with Connor?” He looked at her, “Did he know about her paying off Sandra or something?”

She jumped slightly before answering, “Um, he didn’t…no, I don’t think so.”

“And he wasn’t hiding anything from me and Thea like another kid?”

She paused, “He was hiding stuff about himself and his relationship with Isabel, but he wasn’t hiding a lovechild or anything; at least not as far as I know.”

“Well, that’s something, I guess,” He said with a grimace. He turned to her, “Before I decide, let me ask you something,” he said carefully. “This stuff Isabel told you about my father, if this was your dad instead of mine, would you want to know?

She considered that for a minute, “I don’t know. I think…I think I would have liked my dad to tell me some of it, not all of it, but the parts that he felt comfortable with.” She looked up at him, “Honestly, I don’t know. I can’t—I can’t really answer that.”

“Okay, got it.” He nodded, “I don’t want to know.”

“Are you sure?” She said in surprise.

He sighed, “Not now, anyway; maybe later. Since Connor it seems like all of my memories of my mom are…tainted,” he said with a grimace. “I know my dad wasn’t perfect, I know he had his demons, but I’d just like to hang onto the good memories I have of him for a little while longer. Plus, Thea will be here tomorrow and if you tell me and it’s something bad, then I’ll have to tell her, and I just really don’t want to deal with that right now; not on top of everything else we’ve got going on.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“Hey,” he said, reaching out to cup her cheek again, “thank you.”
“You don’t have to thank me for that,” she told him.

“I do,” he told her, his mouth curving into a tender smile. “I know…I know this was tough for you especially given how things are between us but the fact that you still care enough to--”

“Of course, I care,” she broke in. “Oliver, I meant what I said; I’m with Bruce but I will never stop caring about you.”

“The last time we spoke you weren’t exactly happy with me,” he reminded her. “You threatened to lock me up then cut me out of your life completely.”

“You were being an ass,” she shot back. “Hopefully now you see why it was that I was annoyed with you. If you and Bruce had just listened to me and worked together as a team we could have figured all of this out weeks ago.”

“Sorry,” he said ruefully.

“Just don’t do it anymore, okay?” She relented, offering him a smile. “And stop with the ‘Felicity can’t take care of herself’ crap; in case you haven’t noticed, I can handle myself just fine. Or did you miss the fact that I broke Helena’s nose?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, she does look a little rough.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll get Sara to give her some herbs before the Gala,” she said with a grin.

He looked up at her then leaned in, brushing his lips softly against hers.

“Oliver…” she breathed, pulling away slightly.

“I know,” he said in a near whisper. “I should probably apologize for doing that but I won’t because I…” he exhaled. “I love you.” He looked her in the eye as he spoke. “Even if you marry Wayne, even if this is it for us, I’ll never stop loving you and I’m not going to apologize for that.”

Not knowing what to say, she moved off the couch instead. “Um, we should get out there.”

He watched her carefully for a moment before nodding. He got up then led her into the kitchen, neither of them saying another word.

Sometime later they were once again eating together around the table, although this time the food that had been so lovingly prepared had long since gone cold. Of course, no one really seemed to care as the majority of the group ignored what was on their plates, as they looked towards J’onn in a mixture of shock and disbelief.

“Mind. Blown,” Gypsy said slowly.

“So why didn’t you tell me any of this sooner?” Mordred asked with a frown. “You could’ve trusted me, you know?”

“I am sorry for having deceived you,” J’onn said contritely.

“I mean, we even dated and you never said anything,” he said with a note of mild disappointment.

“Wait,” Gypsy said, turning to look at him, “You and J’onn dated?”
“No, well, *Alice* and I dated,” he corrected.

“We did?” J’onn asked with a frown.

“I thought we did,” Mordred told him. “I mean, I asked you out and you said yes. I figured the reason it never went further than that was because you either weren’t interested or you were gay and just didn’t want to tell me.”

“What made you think that?” He asked, tilting his head in a bird-like manner.

“When I kissed you goodnight you didn’t kiss me back,” he told him.

“You kissed J’onn?” Gypsy goggled. “When?”

“It was before we met,” he assured her. “Plus, again, he was Alice at the time.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize I was supposed to,” J’onn said with a frown. “Human courtship rituals are highly confusing. However, I assure you, had I known that’s what you expected of me I would have returned the gesture.”

“That’s…okay,” Mordred said, clearing his throat.

“Aw damn,” Luke winced in sympathy. “At least now I don’t feel bad about thinking he was hot,” Luke muttered. “I mean, it could’ve been worse, right? I could’ve been that guy.”

“True,” Dick agreed.

“So if you don’t think these Korilites took my daughter then who did?” Lyla asked, her eyes hard.

“I do not know but, I assure you, once this matter is settled I will try to help you find out,” he told her.

“We all will,” Sara said, reaching out and giving her hand a squeeze.

“Birds of Prey forever,” Laurel agreed.

“Thanks guys,” Lyla sighed, her anger seeming to drain away. “How am I going to explain all of this to John?” She said, rubbing her fingers over her temples.

“I will be glad to speak to your husband as well,” J’onn told her.

“Thanks,” Lyla said, nodding to him gratefully. “Also, for the record, he’s my ex-husband, not my husband.”

“Forgive me; I will be glad to speak to your ex-husband then,” he said, inclining his head slightly.

“I appreciate it. Seriously.”

“No problem,” he said, nodding. “I, too, lost my daughter so I know the pain you must feel.” His eyes took on a faraway look, “I still miss her even after all these years.” She gave him a look of understanding and he nodded.

“Okay, so it’s getting late and I know you guys need to head out soon, right,” Felicity said getting up from her chair.

“Right,” Barda told her. “If you have no more need of us tonight then Sonia and I will head to
Orbital now.”

“Okay, thanks,” she nodded to the women as they headed out. “Are you sure you guys will be okay?”

“The crib at the facility has several beds as well as showers and Mr. Alfred gave us plenty of leftovers,” Sonia said holding up the canvas shopping bag filled with Tupperware. “We’ll be fine.”

“I’ll join you,” Katana said, turning to Felicity. “Just in case the facility isn’t as empty as we think it is, it would be best to have someone there with Director privileges. I’ll return tomorrow to help watch over our unexpected guests.”

“Good thinking,” Felicity said with a frown. “Thanks.”

“Not at all,” Katana said as she followed the other women out.

“We’ll go with you,” Booster said as he and Ted joined them.

“Me, too,” Wildcat said, pausing to give Felicity a kiss on the cheek then offered her a wink, “I left a few packs of cards and some poker chips in my truck. Maybe I still got some time to win a few bucks from these jokers.”

She grinned at him as he took off, “Good luck.”

“Have you seen those guys? I doubt he’ll need it,” Renee snorted.

“Yeah,” Dick agreed getting up as well along with Luke. “I’ve played poker with Wildcat; if anyone needs some good luck, it’s them. Are you running Watchtower again tonight or patrolling?” He asked the man beside him.

“I can run coms,” Luke shrugged, “No big deal. I can do it from the console downstairs then crash up here after.” He looked to Sara who gave him a wink then grinned. “Maybe, if we’re lucky, we can even make an early night of it.”

“I left the tumbler in the Cave along with my suit earlier. Are you guys coming, too?” He asked, looking to Bruce and Oliver.

“Yeah, why not?” Oliver said. “Is my gear still in the back?” Dick nodded.

“In that case, I’ll let you take it tonight and head back to the manor,” Bruce said causing Dick to look at him in surprise.

“You’re sure?”

Bruce nodded, “For tonight anyway. Before you leave out though there’s still a few things we all should discuss downstairs.” He looked to Renee, “Are you coming?”

“Yeah,” she nodded before turning to Laurel, “Feel like busting some heads with me?”

“Sure,” she grinned. “Let me grab my leathers first since I assume we’ll be heading out on your motorcycle and not Felicity’s minivan.”

“I still can’t believe you got a minivan?” Lyla said dubiously.

“It’s a really cool minivan,” Felicity told her. “Trust me.”
“No thanks, I’ll just stick with the Zinda and the occasional chopper;” the other woman snorted.

“There’s a few extra motorcycles in the main Cave,” Bruce told Laurel. “You and Question can take the tunnels and pick whatever you want.”

“I don’t know…” Laurel frowned.

“It’s not like you need a driver’s license to be a masked vigilante,” Renee murmured.

“Good point,” she shrugged. “Sounds good, thanks Bruce; I appreciate it.”

“Like Felicity said,” he gave her a wry grimace, “We’re all on the same team here.”

She smirked then turned to her sister, “Are you coming, Sara?”

“I think I’ll help stand guard over these two, instead; maybe sleep off some of this jet lag,” Sara told her before glancing at Luke, “However, I might head down to check out this Watchtower thing for a minute or two,” she said giving him a slow grin.

“I’ll be happy to help you poke around a little,” he offered flirtatiously.

“Can we come, too?” Gypsy asked.

“Yeah, I’d love to check out this Watchtower set up,” Mordred said eagerly.

“Uh, okay,” Luke said, his face falling slightly. “If it’s okay with Bruce that is. I mean, he’s usually pretty reluctant to let new people near Watchtower, right Bruce?” He asked hopefully.

Bruce looked to Felicity and she gave him a small nod, “Just don’t touch anything,” he said gruffly.

“Cool,” Mordred said, bobbing his head with a grin. “Alright, I get to see Batman’s sanctum sanctorum, nice!”

“Yeah, great,” Luke said morosely then sighed. “Follow me, I guess,” he said leading them out of the room.

“Well, I’m going to bed,” Savant said, offering a glowering Bruce a triumphant look. “Coming, Mr. Creote?”

“In a moment, sir,” the Russian said as he began to gather the dishes along with Alfred and the other remaining Birds. “First I wish to help our hosts clear up a bit.”

“Very well then,” he said then gave Bruce another smirk, “Thanks again, old man, for the hospitality.”

Bruce stood next to Felicity with murder in his eye as he watched Savant leave, “When all this is over…”

“Just don’t do it in the house,” she told him with a wry grimace. “Pulverize him outside where the rain can wash away all the blood or where we can use a power washer or something.”

“Agreed,” he said, his lips twitching upwards slightly as he leaned in to place a soft kiss on her lips. “I’ll just be a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay,” she nodded and smiled as he followed the others out.
The rest of them began cleaning up and putting away the leftovers.

“I’m not doing the dishes,” Helena said firmly as she carried an armload of dirty dishes to the sink beside Sara.

“Yes, you are,” Sara said dryly. “Besides, it’s called a ‘dishwasher’, Princess. No need to get your delicate little rich girl hands dirty. If you’re going to be living here then you’ll have to learn how to do this stuff eventually.”

“Whatever,” the other woman said rolling her eyes at her.

“Do you guys have this handled in here?” Felicity asked. “I need to talk to J’onn for a minute.”

“Certainly, Miss,” Alfred told her.

“Thanks, Alfred,” she said gratefully.

The alien moved to her side and looked down at her curiously, “What did you need to speak to me about?”

“Not here,” she said quietly before leading him out of the kitchen and into the study.

The room was empty, everyone having gone through the false wall behind the clock already, but she waited until J’onn shut the door behind him before speaking.

“I can’t speak Russian,” she told him apropos to nothing. He frowned and she shifted uneasily, “I also can’t speak French, Japanese, or whatever else they said I spoke to Savant earlier.”

“I see,” he said knowingly as he sat down on the couch that she and Oliver had occupied earlier.

He motioned for her to join him and she sat down, twisting her hands nervously in her lap, “I always had a tin ear for languages so…” He nodded knowingly, “Not only that, but I can still see you.” He looked at her curiously and she swallowed, “I mean, no one else seemed to react to you when you walked in so I’m assuming you didn’t look like yourself, right?”

“No,” he said quietly. “Right now I do, but earlier, before I revealed myself to the others, I appeared as ‘John Jones’.”

“What…what was I supposed to see?” She asked, a small fission of fear curling in her stomach.

She felt the buzzing and shift around him that she’d felt before, then he lifted his hand hesitantly and brought it to her temple, “May I?”

“What are you going to do?” She asked, looking at him slightly askance.

“It won’t hurt,” he assured her. “I merely wish to join our consciousness so that I may show you my appearance. I promise you, I will not invade your thoughts without your permission.”

After a second’s hesitation, she nodded and he laid his fingertips against her temple.

She felt the cool feeling of rainwater wash over her and then a pressure began to build at the base of her skull. She closed her eyes and when she opened them a tall, slim African American man wearing J’onn’s clothes was sitting in his place, a soft but curious smile lighting his features.

“Hi,” she said, feeling the absurd urge to burst into nervous laughter as she looked at him.
“Hello,” he said, his grin broadening as well.

“Why is this happening to me?” She asked, tears suddenly pricking the corners of her eyes.

“It’s alright,” he assured her, making a soothing noise as he moved his fingers from her temple to take her hand in his gently.

“No, it’s not,” she said with a sob before clearing her throat. “How---why?”

“I do not know,” he told her.

“So does this mean I’m a meta-human?” She asked him. “My friend, Barry; he was in that blast and became the Flash.” She took a centering breath, “He went into a coma and I stayed with him for a while. Maybe…maybe I was exposed to some kind of residual radiation or something--?”

“I don’t think so,” he said as his soft brown eyes, so different yet still the same, searched her face. “Your mind feels much more familiar than that.”

“Than what?” She asked in confusion.

“Than a human mind,” he told her carefully.

“But I am human,” she objected.

“Yes,” he agreed, “and no. I don’t know what you are, Felicity, only what you are not. And I know that when you say my name, you say it as my own people would.” His brow furrowed slightly, “I have not heard my name said in that way for a very long time.”

“It…” she shook her head, “This is going to sound weird, but it tastes like Pop Rocks; your name.”

He chuckled, “Pop Rocks,” he mused.

“And when you say my name it feels like rain and sounds like bells.”

He nodded again, seeming pleased by her answers, “Yes, that it what it sounds like to me as well.”

“This is crazy,” she told him.

“My people did not communicate with spoken words, not to each other,” he told her. “Instead, they communicated in thought and emotion. It was a more complete way of recognizing each other,” he said slowly. “To speak a name…it’s not just a designation, it’s a reflection of one’s truest self.”

“I don’t think I understand,” she said worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

“It’s like when I was communicating with Ace,” he told her. “It was less about words than it was about a feeling; both physical and emotional. When I ‘spoke’ to Ace, he told me your name, remember?” She nodded, “He communicated that through both sense memory, like the heat of a summer day and the smell of cut grass, as well as a feeling of happiness. That, to him, was how your name felt to him.”

“Like how your name tastes like Pop Rocks?” She asked slowly.

“Like how my name tastes like Pop Rocks,” he agreed.

“So, what? I’m some kind of telepath?” She asked incredulously. “Because I can’t--”
“No,” he said, stopping her. “I don’t believe you are a telepath or, if you are, it is only in a very limited capacity. However, I do believe you have a strong empathic ability which allows you to ‘read’ people and their intentions far better than most people can.”

“So how did I speak all those languages and why did they sound like English to me?” She asked him.

“Again, I don’t know,” he told her. “I can tell you that my own people were highly empathic as well and language, all language, isn’t just comprised of sound but intention and feeling which is how we were able to make contact with so many different races and yet still be able to communicate.”

“So you think I’m part Martian?” She asked doubtfully.

“Perhaps one of your ancestors may have been and your abilities are some sort of throwback to that but I do not know,” he told her. “I would have to look deeper and even then we may never know.”

“I don’t…” she sighed, “Why is this happening now? Why now?”

“Again, I wish I had an answer for you but I do not,” he said regretfully. “Perhaps you’ve always had these abilities and are only now coming to recognize them?”

“I think I would have noticed something like that,” she said flatly.

“What is empathy but the ability to make an emotional connection to another being?” He asked her. “In the short time I have known you I have seen the impact you have made on the lives around you. Although these abilities may just now be in bloom, I suspect that you have always used them, however unknowingly, only you never noticed them before because you never had a reason to.”

“What do you mean?” She frowned.

“If this is something that has always been within you, then to you it is as normal as breathing,” he said simply. “You would have no reason to question something that was always there.”

She heard the whirr of the lift behind the wall and turned to J’onn, “Look, can I call you sometime? I still have your number but Bruce is going to come in and--”

“I understand,” he nodded as he rose to his feet. “When you are ready, if you should need me, I will come.”

“Thanks,” she said gratefully.

“No, Felicity; thank you,” the other man said gratefully as his features shifted back to the emerald countenance that she had grown used to.

Later that night, she lay in Bruce’s arms and thought about everything that had happened, about the revelations about Isabel and Miranda, and about what J’onn had told her.

Truthfully, she didn’t know what to think about any of it. It was all so confusing and exhausting but her mind kept tumbling over and over, preventing her from falling asleep.

If J’onn was right and she was supposedly so good at reading people then how had she not figured out who Miranda really was? Yeah, she knew something about her was off but, at the same time, she’d felt such a strange kinship to the woman, especially during their first two meetings and even at
the end of the third when she spoke to her in the office.

Maybe J’onn was wrong. Maybe it was just some kind of leftover from her being in Central City right after the explosion. Obviously, whatever it was, it wasn’t working too well, so maybe it would just go away on its own?

“What’s wrong, Baby?”

She looked up at him, “I thought you were asleep?”

He ran his fingers down her back and sighed, “No.”

When they got to the manor, he’d helped her with her bags and then she put on her nightgown before they slipped into his bed, now their bed, together. They didn’t make love, both silently agreeing that sleep was more important than passion given all that they’d been through. She thought he had fallen asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow because he’d been as silent and still as the grave but apparently his thoughts had been just as troubled as hers had been, if not more so.

“Talia?” She asked him.

“Yeah. She was supposed to be dead,” he said quietly and she could hear the pain behind his words.

She took a deep breath, “Are you okay?”

“No,” he told her then shifted a bit as he pulled her closer, “Having you here helps though.”

She rubbed her cheek against his chest then chuckled, “That was not the Friendsgiving I was planning to have, that’s for sure.”

His chest rumbled with laughter under her cheek and he rolled onto his side to face her. His fingertips brushing her hair off her forehead gently, “I love you.”

“I know,” she told him, settling against the pillow. “I love you back.”

“I hate that she ever got near you,” Bruce said, his eyes darkening with anger. “I should have known, I--!”

“Don’t,” she said, leaning in to brush her lips against his.

He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against hers, “When Talia died…” he sighed, “Ra’s disappeared and she was dead, I was so lost in grief over Damian, but part of me was relieved because it was over and now, just when I’ve finally gotten you back, this happens.” He ran his hand down her back soothingly, “It’s just…frustrating, and it feels like this is never going to end.”

“It’s okay,” she told him.

“It’s not okay, Baby,” he told her, his eyes meeting hers, the pain reflected in them almost palatable, “Not until every single one of them are dead, for real this time.” He grimaced, “I swear, even if I have to--”

“No,” she shushed him by laying her fingers across his lips.

“It has to end,” he told her, pulling her hand away gently. “In order for us to be happy, in order for this to end, Ra’s al Ghul and his entire twisted bloodline has to be wiped off the face of the earth once and for all.”
“No,” she said again. “That’s your pain talking. You are not a killer, Bruce.”

“No, no I’m not,” he said resignedly. “But sometimes I wish I was.”

“Stop it,” she said, snuggling closer to wrap her arms around him. “Stop blaming yourself for things you can’t control or decisions you made in the past. You can’t change the past, Bruce; all you can do is create a better future.”

“As long as Talia is in our lives…” He began.

“She’s not,” she reminded him before meeting his eyes once again, “Talia is not in our lives; not unless you bring her in. The only two people in this bed are you and me; Talia can’t take that away from us.”

He averted his eyes and tightened his jaw, “I don’t know if we can get married after the Gala now, not with Talia being out there.”

“So we’ll wait,” she told him, carding her fingers through his dark hair. “We’ll wait until you’re ready. That’s what you told me, right? I can offer you the same deal now that you offered me this morning; when you’re ready then we’ll both be ready.”

“What if I can’t give you the life I promised you?” Bruce asked her quietly.

“What do you mean?” She frowned.

He sighed, “If Talia--”

“Don’t do this,” she told him. “Don’t try to push me away again over this.”

“I’m not,” he assured her then, at her worried expression, tilted her chin up and kissed her, “I’m not,” he said against her lips. “I’m not ever letting you go. Not again.”

She searched his expression, “What then?”

“I never wanted any of this to touch you,” he told her. “I never wanted *them* to be part of our lives.” His face stilled, “I never wanted you to see me like this.”

“Like what?” She frowned again.

“Weak, helpless,” he swallowed. “Talia…she has a way of turning me inside out and Ra’s…” his mouth tightened, “The only person I have ever hated more than him was the Joker. Ra’s and Talia have a way of making me feel irrational and I just get so consumed by it that I can’t think straight. She used that confusion and hatred against me time and time again then. She used me, made me think I was protecting her then tried to destroy me, then dropped Damian on me just to watch me squirm only to kill him after I finally began to get through to him...” He rolled onto his back and rubbed his hand over his forehead, “Right before she was supposed to have died, we fought and I asked her how she could have done it, how she could have killed our son just to hurt me,” He took a deep breath then closed his eyes, “She told me he wasn’t our ‘son’, that he was just something grown in a jar, a ‘folly’ in his ‘little cape and boots’ that I’d martyred by enlisting him in what she called, my foolish game of ‘masks, Halloween costumes, and clues.’” He opened his eyes and tilted his head to look at her, “She said it was my fault he was dead, that I killed him when I dragged him into my life and she was right.”

“She was wrong,” Felicity said sitting up and leaning over him. “You didn’t kill your son.”
“I did,” he said simply, reaching up to cup her cheek, his eyes filled with regret. “I may not have killed him with my own hands but I put him out there, I put all of them out there, so their blood is on my hands.” He pulled her down and laid a kiss on her forehead, “I don’t want to lose you, too; not to Talia and her damn revenge. I can’t lose you, too.”

“Then don’t.” she straddled his hips and laid her hands on his chest so she could lean over him fully, forcing his attention on her. “If we let her control us, if we let her or anyone else dictate how we live our lives, then the only person who wins is Talia.”

He put his hands on her hips and shook his head, “Baby…”

“No, Bruce, you told me that by not talking about Slade, that by letting my nightmares take over my life, that I was letting him have control over me,” she reminded him. “This is me telling you to follow your own advice; don’t give her that power. I have no intention of allowing that woman to use me as a weapon against you, so stop using her as an excuse to put up walls between us.”

“What if you get hurt?” He asked her, his jaw clenched.

“Yes, I could die; what we do is dangerous but I could also get hit by a bus or get struck by lightning. I’m the exact same age my mother was when she died of leukemia; anything could happen, but I’m here now. I love you *now*, and it’s my choice to be here with you. It’s my choice, Bruce; not yours and not anyone else’s, but if you don’t want me here then-”

He rolled them over, causing her to gasp as he looked down at her from where he was cradled between her thighs, “I want you,” he said in a graver tone filled with a combination of pain and longing. “I will never stop wanting you.”

“Then you have me,” she said simply.

He slanted his lips over hers, his tongue tasting her before he pulled away to whisper against her lips, “Will you still marry me? Even if it takes longer to get there then we hoped?”

“Already said I would,” she breathed back. “More than once.”

“I’ve loved women before,” he told her. “Not as much as you, but I loved them and they couldn’t take it; they couldn’t take this life and the uncertainty that comes with it.”

She smiled, “I’m already in it so this is normal for me.”

His lips twitched upwards slightly, “Maybe we can’t do this now, maybe we’ll have to wait a while, but don’t give up on me,” he asked her, his eyes nearly black with longing. “Just give me a chance and, I promise, I’ll find a way to fix this and then we can let it go once and for all—”

“*We’ll* fix this,” she corrected him, “And I won’t leave you, I promise; not over something as trivial as some bitter ex-girlfriend with a grudge and too much time on her hands.” She rolled her eyes, “Seriously, why can’t your ex-girlfriends just dis you on Facebook like a normal person would instead of coming up with these elaborate Bond-villain plots? I mean, sex scandals and alien invasions? Please. I would have just ruined your credit score and been happy with that.” His lips quirked upwards again and she smiled, “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he said then kissed her, his eyes glittering with some other dark emotion. “You know, this is the first time I’ve had you in this bed in more than four years. I think it’s long overdue for a re-christening, don’t you?”
“So is this going to be just a brief christening ceremony or are we doing the usual marathon?” She snickered as his stubble tickled the sensitive skin of her neck.

He frowned, “Definitely the marathon, I think. After all, we wouldn’t want to waste all that momentum we’ve been building up, do we?”

“Are you sure you’re ‘up’ to the challenge?” She teased.

“You tell me,” he chuckled as he pressed against her and began kissing down her neck again, causing her to laugh out loud.

As they made love, then later as they slept, they were able to push aside the looming threats and feeling of doom that seemed to constantly be hanging over their heads, if only for this one stolen moment of peace.
Chapter Fifty-Nine

Chapter Notes

Lots of stuff to tell you guys today, but first, an apology for the long wait. I know it looked bad but I have been working on this chapter every single day. For some reason though my brain kept shutting down. Part of that was health related. I don't normally whine about that crap but, for those not in the know, I live in Mississippi, a state that exists somewhere near the border of Hell where the weather patterns make no fucking sense whatsoever. Our weather since Christmas has been 17 degrees one day, 70 the next, 40 in the morning, 80 in the afternoon.

And all of it a wet hell.

I've had a sinus migraine every single fucking day.

Not only that, but did you know that aspirin lowers blood sugar? Yes, well, it does so I have had numerous sugar drops as a result and, guess what? Those cause headaches and lethargy, as well as confusion so, yeah. It took a while despite writing on it for upwards of 12 hours a day with no breaks.

Not looking for sympathy, just telling you like it is. Hopefully we're almost done though and, hopefully, God will stop smiting me and the weather will pick a season and fucking stick to it.

Also, on a lighter note, some of the illustrations have been changed slightly to reflect my pick for Talia/Miranda, a Turkish actress by the name of Tuba Buyukustun.

I think you'll agree, that is definitely Talia al Ghul, so much so that I hope they cast her as such if they ever have her on either the Arrow or the Batman films.
Also, just a reminder, in case you didn't see it, TeaWithLemon posted a few Batlicitys while I was stuck struggling through a series of delays combined with migraines:

This Stage

http://archiveofourown.org/works/3124436/chapters/6771218

and, my personal pick;

The Days Series

http://archiveofourown.org/series/205685

Fucking AWESOME!. Please read, kudo, and comment...her Bruce is Christian Bale which I can deal with even if the actor is a bit of a douche.

Speaking of fancasting, we have a game afoot in the exit notes so feel free to join in, this should be fun.

I know that it took a long time to get out but this is a very loooooong chapter that could have easily been 400 pages if I kept going, no shit. I had *so much* I wanted to put in this but, when I sailed past 150 pages and realized that I wasn't even half-way through what I wanted to make happen, I knew it was time to let it go and split them.

Hopefully the next chapter won't take as long to get out. This is a lot of tender Bruce/Felicity, very smoochy, he'll make you want to cuddle, he'll piss you off, he'll make you want to slap the shit out of him then tear his pants off--lots of highs and lows here and more to come before the Gala.

Last, but certainly not least, this:
This was drawn by a very talented thirteen year old artist and Still Waters reader named Germaine in response to Friendsgiving. I've also added it to the art of the previous chapter as well. I'm not an artist. I wish I was an artist, I have the soul of an artist, the drive of an artist, and hands that were made for typing instead. I always wished I could draw like this though. Please let the artist know how lovely and thoughtful their gift to us was through her DeviantArt page here:

http://gata-art.deviantart.com/

Or in my comments section and I'll be sure to forward it to her. I am so humbled, my friend, by both your generosity and talent. TURDUCKEN! ;p
Enjoy!
---Jen

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Chapter Fifty-Nine

Felicity awoke to the feeling of Bruce’s fingers stroking over her stomach and his breath tickling the back of her neck. She pressed back against him sleepily, snuggling closer into his warmth, and was rewarded with a low, satisfied growl as he began kissing her bare shoulder.

“Morning, Baby,” he graved out.

“Good morning,” she hummed with a smile as she rolled over and drew her leg against his under the covers.

His hands cupped her hips, pulling her into his chest, as he gave her a leisurely kiss before speaking. “I’ve just decided something,” he told her. “New rule.”

“What’s that?” She asked blinking at him fuzzily.

“Nightgowns, even the sexy granny ones, are heretofore permanently banned from this room.”
“Sexy granny, huh?” She repeated in amusement. “I did not need that visual before my first cup of coffee, thank you.”

“Get used to it,” he said as he ran his fingers through her sleep tousled curls lazily, “If I have my way then someday you’ll be the sexiest granny any kid ever had.” With his free hand, he trailed one finger from her cheek down to her chest where he teased the swell of her breasts that were visible above the sheets, “However, we weren’t talking about grandmothers, we were talking about nightgowns and the fact that they are now banned from this bedroom permanently. In fact, no more pajamas of any kind, ever. From here on out, you should just sleep naked,” he said, his voice still husky with sleep as his wandering hand slipped under the sheets to cup her bare bottom and the other moved from her hair to cradle her neck gently as he kissed her again. It was a slow kiss; unheated, unhurried, but filled with sleepy passion nonetheless. “Actually, you should just stay naked all the time, 24/7,” he said, smiling against her.

“Uh huh?” She said with a soft, sleepy grin, “And why’s that?”

“Because it would save time and I’m kind of a busy guy in case you hadn’t noticed,” he said with feigned sincerity. “Plus, easier access and it saves you all the trouble of having to get dressed, then me having to undress you, then you having to get dressed again…really, it’s a win-win all around when you think about it.”

“True,” she nodded through a jaw cracking yawn as the last dregs of sleep pulled at her.

“I’m glad you agree,” he said again in the same solemn tone even as his lips once again twitched upwards.

It wasn’t often that Bruce got into these silly, playful moods, but when they did happen they were pure gold; the kind of thing she wished she could tie up in a box and keep forever in her memory chest. They were so rare in fact, that despite her body telling her to skip breakfast and finish catching up on all the sleep debt she’d accrued, she decided to play along instead. With some effort, she managed to school her features into an expression of mock gravity much to his obvious amusement, “Plus it’s good for the environment because it means less laundry so less water consumption. And, if you stayed naked all the time too, well then, think of how much good *that* would do,” she said wide-eyed. “By not having to dry clean those suits of yours, why, we could probably reverse global warming altogether. When you really think about it, it would be irresponsible of us not to be naked.”

He chuckled, “Exactly.” His pressed a kiss against her lips before pulling back slightly, his mouth pulled down into a mock-frown even as his deep sapphire eyes danced with mirth. “So we’ll both just stay naked all the time then,” he said in a businesslike tone.
“Agreed,” she nodded then paused, “But what if I get cold, what then?” She asked him with an exaggerated moue of her lips.

“I suppose I’ll just have to warm you up,” he hummed, his teeth grazing her neck before nuzzling her earlobe with his nose and inhaling her scent. “You smell so warm and sweet, like baby powder and sunshine…and me.”

“Is that good?” She asked, shivering slightly as his fingers ran over her spine.

“Very good,” he said huskily. “So good that I’m planning to eat you for breakfast.”

“I like this plan already,” she hummed back before looking into his eyes curiously, “You’re in a surprisingly good mood this morning,” she observed quietly. “I thought for sure you’d be up before dawn and dragging me down to that cold, damp cave of yours without even letting me stop for coffee first.”

His smile faltered and he drew back, his eyes darkening slightly.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “I didn’t mean—”

“No,” he told her. He picked up her hand and pressed a soft kiss to her knuckles before laying it against his cheek. “No, you’re right; normally I’d be a raging mess and already in the Cave trying to track Talia down but, I don’t know.” He rolled over onto his back and scrubbed his hand though his hair as he stared up at the ceiling, “I’m still angry and I need to find her, but I’m not as…I just don’t feel as panicked as I did last night. Instead I feel…” he exhaled roughly, “Frankly, I don’t know what to feel anymore, but mad as hell comes pretty close to it.”

She scooted close, laying her head on his chest in order to absorb his body heat once more. “Last night, after we found out about Talia, I wouldn’t say you looked angry exactly; you looked…I don’t know,” she said with a concerned frown, “Hollow.”

“Hollow is a good word for it, too,” he said, exhaling roughly before drawing her deeper into his embrace and rubbing his chin over her hair. “We can add it to the list along with bleak, pissed, enraged, livid,” he continued, “but not as much as I should have been.” His eyes met hers and she could see the pain in his eyes, “That’s another word to add to the rest; numb. I felt numb,” he told her. “Worse than numb; I felt frozen in place and I can’t afford to freeze up like that again.”
“Bruce, you were in shock…”

“But I shouldn’t have been,” he said forcefully. “I should know better than that! But it wasn’t just the shock of it that caused me to go numb; it was her.” He closed his eyes, pressing the heel of his hand against them then rubbing his forehead as if pained, “I woke up this morning with you in my arms and…” He blew out a ragged breath.

“And what?” She asked quietly.

“And I didn’t feel anything, not about her.” He looked at her, his brow furrowed slightly in confusion, “I just wanted to think about you, and about this; about our life together and our family. The last thing I wanted to do is have to think about *her*,” he said with distaste. “I didn’t want to face thinking about it right away because, frankly, I’m confused; I don’t know how to…sort it all out,” he said helplessly. His eyes met hers again. “I’m not used to being this unprepared or--I should want to kill her after what happened to Damian,” he said emphatically. “Baby, I should have wanted Talia dead after she said the things she said about him but, after she died, I…” he took a shaky breath, “I don’t know, I hate to admit it but I actually found myself mourning her a bit, and now…I’m,” he swallowed, “all mixed up.”

He shifted on the bed, his hands reaching behind him to adjust the pillow, bunching it under his head. His eyes lowered, “I want to find her, I want to stop her, but…” he grimaced, “I don’t know how to feel anymore, does that make sense? I don’t know how to process any of this but I can’t…” He looked to her once more as if seeking answers, his expression more open than she had ever seen it before. “I don’t have time for this, Felicity; I can’t take the time to fall apart right now but I…thought it was over but it’s not.” His voice grew heavy, weary, and that bleakness that she’d sensed last night radiated off of him once more, “I’m a man who always has a plan. I plan for every possible outcome, every contingency no matter how horrific or damning to my soul it may be, but I don’t know how I’m supposed to do what I know has to be done and keep my sanity intact anymore. Talia has always been my biggest weakness, she’s always gotten to me in a way no other enemy ever has, and I don’t know how to fight that; I’ve never known how to fight that.”

This was the ultimate expression of his trust, she realized. Telling her he loved her, sharing his secrets; all that paled in comparison to this. This was Bruce showing her his soft underbelly, something he’d never really done before, not with her. He’d come close, but never to this extent.

It was, quite frankly, scary as shit, she thought ruefully. This was definitely one of those moments where she really, really didn’t want to put her foot in her mouth.

“Do you love her?” She asked carefully.
“No,” he said without hesitation. “I’ve never been in love with Talia, not the way she wanted me to love her, but…” his mouth tightened, “I don’t know what to call it but it’s somewhere between love and hate. I’d be lying if I said we didn’t have some kind of connection that goes beyond mere lust though, or just some sick infatuation; I care about her, I can’t help it. I don’t want to care but, even after everything she’s done, even after everything I’ve lost because of her, part of me still…feels something, some pull that makes me want to save her even though she doesn’t deserve it. Maybe it’s just displaced guilt, or some paternal instinct resulting from the fact that we shared a child together; I don’t know.”

She took a deep breath, “Is that why you want to hold off on getting married? You’re not sure about-?”

“No,” he said firmly, his fingers tightening on her hip, “I have no doubts about my feelings for you. I am in love with you and only you,” he emphasized. “I never once told Talia I loved her, much less offered to marry her, even after I found out about Damian. In Talia’s mind though, she’s always believed we were fated to be together, that I was, in some cosmic way, her soulmate, but I never indulged those delusions; not once. The only reason I wanted to put off the wedding was because, with Talia in the game, anything could happen and I can’t leave Gotham, not now. If we got married here and now, there is no way we could keep it under wraps and then…”

“Got it,” she said ruefully.

“I still want to marry you though,” he said, his eyes searching her face, “I’d marry you right now, despite the danger, if you wanted me to. You believe me, right?”

“I believe you,” she assured him.

“Good, because…” He bent his head towards her and brushed his lips over hers, “I’m your husband and you’re my wife even without that paper; I’m yours and you’re mine. We’re connected at our souls, Baby. What little bit of one I have left belongs only to you and Talia can’t touch that. I’m never letting her take you away from me or vice versa.”

“I love you, too,” she said quietly, her fingers rasping against the stubble on his cheek. She pulled back slightly, looking at him in concern, “Is it your feelings over Talia that you’re having trouble processing, or Damian, the mission?”

“All of the above,” he said quietly as he sat back against the pillows once more. “It’s hard to…get a
“That’s understandable,” she said after a moment. “It’s a confusing situation, she meant for it to be. Besides, you said so yourself, you once cared for her, right? Having someone come back from the dead…well, it seems to happen a lot to us but that doesn’t make it any easier,” she teased and his lips quirked upwards slightly. “And your feelings for her are extremely complicated; you cared for her, had a child with her even if it wasn’t by your choice, then she took him from you.”

“She didn’t just ‘take’ him; she killed my son, Felicity,” he said raggedly. “She ordered his own clone to murder him in cold blood. I shouldn’t be confused; I should be getting ready to tear her to pieces with my bare hands before scattering her ashes to the four corners of the earth like she’s some goddamn vampire! Which she is,” he said intently. “They all are; all of them. Ra’s, Talia, even Nyssa; they’re monsters, nightmares who feed off of misery, death, and insanity. They have no souls and they kill without thought or hesitation as long as it suits their own twisted world view. What does that say about me?” He looked at her, “What does it say about the kind of man I am that I could feel anything but hatred for that woman?”

“That you’re a good man,” she told him.

“I’m not a good man,” he warned her. “I’m fucked up and this whole situation is fucked up.” He inhaled a ragged breath as he pushed his hair off his forehead. “It’s sick; this whole fucking thing is just sick and I’m tired of feeling like it’s never going to end! I need to kill her, I should *want* to kill her. Letting her live after all this is too much of a risk. She’s dangerous, unstable, plus letting her live would be like the worst kind of betrayal to Damian’s memory…but…I can’t do it,” he said tiredly. “I can’t hurt Talia no matter what she’s done and that makes me feel like I’m—like I’m burying him all over again.” He rubbed his hands over his eyes with a pained grimace, “Fuck!”

She bit her lip, “I know, and I’m not…” she paused, “I can’t, um, I can’t imagine what this is like for you; I can’t. If you and I had a child and he was taken from us or killed…” She closed her eyes and listened to his heart as it thumped in his chest. “I don’t know, I can’t imagine that kind of pain,” she looked up into his troubled expression.

“I didn’t even want him,” he said, his eyes filled with shame.

“I know,” she said swallowing.

“There were times, lots of times, when I wished he had never been born,” he admitted. “I didn’t even know how much I…’ he paused, “I just, I never really thought of him as mine, not really. My responsibility, yes; but not my son. I couldn’t. In my mind he was the abomination Ra’s said he was,
some perverse homunculus disguised as a child. I looked at him and I couldn’t see myself or my blood, all I saw was Ra’s twisted legacy. I could barely even stand to be in the same room with him; hell, I had to force myself to even say his name in the beginning. He sensed that, too; it’s why he **hated** Tim but tolerated Dick to the point that they actually became friends. Dick and I were always more like brothers, but Tim…” He looked at her, “Damian knew that even though he wasn’t biologically my child. Tim was more my son than he’d ever be which is why, even after I acknowledged he was mine, even when I began to feel something for him, I never made him my heir. I never forgot that even though he was biologically my son, he was Ra’s al Ghul’s grandson and I wasn’t about to give him control over that kind of money or power. Tim, however, was my heir, my son; my hope for the future of both Wayne Enterprises and the mission, and always will be. If Damian didn’t know that before, he definitely knew that after I ‘died’ for five months and left it all split between Tim and Dick, with Tim taking the lion’s share and control of the board. It took a lot of work to regain the headway we’d lost, but I still never bothered to change my will nor did I ever lie to him about that.” He took a shaky breath, “Even after all the progress he’d made in my absence, I knew a large part of him would always be…what Ra’s and Talia designed him to be.”

“What he was, was your son,” she objected. “You’ve said it a hundred times; Damian was your son and you loved him.”

Bruce looked at her, “Now. I can say that now, but then I couldn’t. The fact remains that, even if I can say I cared about him now, Damian died knowing I never wanted to be his father. I never had the opportunity to become his father either because, just as I was beginning to think of him as mine, just as we were finally reaching that point in our relationship where I could see the light at the end of the tunnel, he was…gone.” He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly causing her curls to flutter slightly before his hand absently brushed them from her forehead, “Because of my inability to wrap my head around that, he died thinking that I never loved him; that I never even gave a damn about him.”

“He knew,” she said quietly.

“I doubt it and, even if he did, it still doesn’t make up for the fact that I failed him in so many other ways,” he said darkly.

“You loved him,” she emphasized. “You should have had more time with Damian but you did the best you could with what you had and that’s enough.”

“I didn’t have enough time--I didn’t even try to make time--because I couldn’t see beyond my hatred towards Ra’s al Ghul, and then I lost my second chance to be his father because Talia killed him in order to punish me,” he said, his voice hardening. “First she violated me to create him, then she dropped him in my lap like a basket full of vipers, and lastly she murdered him just to watch me suffer. And yet, after all that, I still can’t hate her,” he huffed.
“Bruce, I’m not excusing what she did, I can’t, but I saw the pain in her eyes when she talked about her children; I don’t know if it was real or just some lie she invented, but those emotions seemed genuine. I don’t know Talia and I barely knew her as Miranda, but any woman who would do that to her own child…” she lifted her head further to look at him more directly, “She’s sick; insane, like you said. It doesn’t excuse it or make it any better, it certainly doesn’t undo the pain of losing your son or bring Damian back, but part of you knows that she’s sick and that she wasn’t fully culpable for her crimes.” She let that sink in for a moment, “My opinion is that if you feel conflicted, it’s not because you didn’t love or care for your son, it’s because you recognize that his mother…” she ducked her head slightly, “You told me that the difference between murder and self-defense is intent. I can’t imagine Talia was sane enough to have the ability to recognize what it was she was doing by that point. It doesn’t make it better, it doesn’t change what happened, but the part of you that isn’t lost in that anger, the part that’s conflicted, that comes from you knowing deep down that killing her or punishing her for something she couldn’t control is wrong. That said, you have a right to be angry,” her eyes met his again. “You have a right to grieve, to mourn your son; you also have the right to mourn her, too.”

“Do I?” He asked her, his voice rough.

“Absolutely,” she told him. “Talia died; the part of her that you once cared for died and you couldn’t help her so I imagine that played on your emotions. I mean, she was sick, *is* sick. She doesn’t need to be executed or punished, she needs to be put away, yes, but she needs to be in a hospital.”

“You think I should send her to Arkham,” he scoffed.

“That’s where you sent the Joker even after all the lives he took, even after he shot Barbara and put her in a wheelchair,” she pointed out. “You sent him to Arkham instead of killing him because you knew he was sick. As much as you hated him, he was mentally ill, not evil; his actions were, but he was just a victim of that illness, a person in pain who was suffering from a horribly destructive disease. Even if he could never get better, even if killing him would have solved everything instantly and would arguably have been a kindness to him and to the world, you knew he needed to be in a hospital where he could receive proper treatment and care. Bruce…” she paused, “I wouldn’t blame you if you did hate her; I wouldn’t even blame you if you killed her, no one would. What she did…” she took a centering breath and blew it out slowly, “No parent, no person with a heart, would blame you for having those feelings. If it had been me…there are no words,” she said closing her eyes, her brow furrowed in sympathy. “I probably would have killed her if I were you. If I had a baby and someone stole him from me like that, I would tear down the world to satisfy that pain and anger inside of me, but I know you. You’re a better man than you give yourself credit for. I know how you feel about murder, revenge; if you allow that hate inside, if you let her cause you to give up on your principles like that, then she’d be gone but you’d be haunted by that memory for the rest of your life and Damian would have died in vain.”

“He did die in vain,” he said sharply even though his hands continued to run down her back in gentle
patterns. “He was ten; ten years old and his own mother ordered his death because of me.”

“No, this was not your fault,” she said firmly. She laid her hand on his cheek and moved his face towards her, “Damian died a hero; you said it yourself. He died, and it shouldn’t have happened. It was terrible and there is nothing anyone can say to make that right, but he died a hero and if you go after Talia, if you keep that hate in your heart, the only person who’ll suffer is you.”

“Maybe I deserve it,” he said so quietly she had to strain to hear it.

“Talia killed Damian to hurt you,” she reminded him. “She…that sickness inside of her, that’s what killed Damian, not you.”

“Rationally, I know that, but—” he began.

“No,” she said cutting him off. “You feel guilty for mourning the woman who killed your son, right?” The look in his eyes told her more than words ever could. Her voice softened, “I’ve been there. I once wept at the funeral of a woman who would have been just as happy to see me in the ground with her; a woman who helped kill 503 people, who almost killed her own son, and who has caused untold misery both before and after her death, and all for the sake of some twisted legacy that only she cared about. I questioned myself about that. I asked why would I cry for a woman who hated me? What kind of person would do something that ridiculous? I’m going to tell you what someone told me: He said that I wasn’t crying over her; I was mourning for the people she left behind, the ones who couldn’t be there because they couldn’t face that kind of pain and loss. They weren’t strong enough and my tears weren’t a sign of weakness, they were a testament to how much I loved them, not how much I cared about her. You were mourning for Damian, for the woman his mother used to be and should have been, not for the woman who killed him.”

He nodded shame-facedly, “You’re right, but the point stands that I didn’t want to still care about her; I don’t want to care, I want to hate her but, like you said, she’s a victim, too. She was his victim; Ra’s…” his mouth twisted for a moment, “Between her father and the Lazarus Pits, something inside her just snapped.” His eyes met hers again, “I don’t know what I can say right now, how to explain it to you in a way that…” he stopped and looked at her guiltily.

“Say what you feel,” she said quietly. “I’m not going to judge you or get angry. If you want to tell me, I’ll listen.”

He pulled her to him and pressed his lips against her hair for a lingering kiss before speaking in a strained voice, “I don’t…I don’t know what she said to you as ‘Miranda’, but Talia wasn’t always that vicious or cruel; dangerous yes, a killer, an assassin, but never…evil, if that makes any sense.”
He inhaled sharply and pressed his forehead against hers, his eyes shut tight. “At least, I didn’t think so back when I first met her but maybe I was just kidding myself. She and Ra’s see themselves as heroes, the lives they take are for the betterment of the entire world and, even though I knew that was bullshit, she had an…innocence about her that appealed to me. I don’t mean sexually,” he hastened to add. “She wasn’t shy about sex. She was very aggressive in that regard and used her sexuality like it was just another weapon in her arsenal, but she also…I think, after she stopped playing games and gave up on trying to seduce me, she actually began to feel something real.” He pulled back and his eyes met hers, the pain in them almost palatable. “Even though she could be cold and manipulative, I think part of her really was in love with me but I…I never really loved her; I couldn’t. I think, in the end, that’s what really wound up destroying her, and that’s on me.”

There was an apology in his eyes as though admitting that out loud would somehow diminish him in her eyes in some way, so she sought to soothe his fears by placing a kiss on his shoulder as he continued to speak.

“Talia would call me her ‘beloved’ in hopes that, one day, I’d say it back but I never gave her anything in return. I never even offered her so much as a kind word to cling to. When we did sleep together, which wasn’t often, it was always rough and fast; there was no emotion behind it, no…tenderness.” As if to emphasize that, his voice softened to a husky rumble and he brought her face to the crook of his neck, his thumb again tracing her cheekbone. “To me it was just an act, a quick screw. It wasn’t making love; we fucked, period. She tried turning it into more than that, she did her best to make me love her…but later that changed.” His fingers continued to travel over her side, causing her to shiver from the overstimulation of his blunt nails on her sensitive skin but said nothing, nor did she protest. She stayed silent and let him feel her presence and support without interruption.

“She decided that all of her pain and suffering was my fault and maybe it was.” He ran the fingers of his free hand across his furrowed brow at that. “I suppose I let my feelings about Ra’s kill any sort of affection I might have had for her. Every time I saw her, even when what I felt came close to true affection for her, I’d see Ra’s and that affection would go cold. I was cruel,” he said flatly. “I hurt her intentionally to strike out at him. Not only did I hurt her, but part of me enjoyed it because I knew that by using her and rejecting her love, I was also ruining Ra’s plans for us. Even Damian,” he admitted. “I kept Damian, taught him, trained him, made him better, not because he was my son and I loved him, but to…” He hesitated, “To take him away from her like she and I were playing a game of chess and he was the prize. I wanted to turn him against his mother, reject everything Ra’s al Ghul stood for, just to spite them and that makes me the worst kind of bastard.”

“You’re still being too hard on yourself,” she said finally speaking up.

He shook his head, “No.”

“You are,” she told him. “Bruce, Talia was a grown woman who chose to be with you even though she knew how you felt. I know you well enough to know you never led her on. If it was just sex like
you said, then I know for a fact that you would have made that clear from the get go. The fact that she wanted more than that is on her, not you,” He began to protest but she cut him off before he could speak, “As for Damian, of course you were reluctant to bond with him in the beginning. First off, as you said, she violated you intimately; she raped you basically, so to be presented with a child born of that kind of violation? Yeah, you needed time to come to grips with that. Just because you’re a man it doesn’t make it any less traumatic. And speaking of Damian, he *chose* to stay with you and she’s the one who put him on your doorstep in the first place. You didn’t ‘steal’ him, you didn’t take him from Talia; she gave him up. The part of her that was still sane had to realize that you would take care of your child, that you would do whatever it took to keep him safe and give him the best life you could. You put him in the mask because that was the only way you could get through to him, it’s what you knew. You can’t keep second guessing and beating yourself up about that.”

“I can,” he disagreed.

“Then stop,” she told him. “Just stop. You told me that Damian was a trained assassin long before you put him on the street. You needed him to respect you, you needed to give him discipline, so you did it by relating to him in a manner he’d understand. If you’d tried to coddle him, if you’d handed him a toy truck and a box of crayons, then tried reading him Dr. Seuss before bedtime, he’d probably have seen that as weakness, right?”

He snorted, “To say the least.”

“Exactly,” she said wryly. “so while you may have made mistakes, you did what you could with what you had, and I don’t believe for one second that you meant to hurt Talia by loving your son. That’s just you trying to make yourself feel guilty because, whether you accept it or not, you do guilt just as much as any other mask out there. You didn’t ‘take’ his love from his mother; you gave him a choice and he chose you.”

“But I did want him to reject her,” he argued.

“You wanted him to stop killing people,” she corrected. “You wanted to give him a better life, show him a better way.” At the stubborn set of his jaw she placed her hand on his cheek and moved closer so he had no choice but to look her in the eye, “Listen to me; you didn’t sneak into his nursery and steal him out of his crib or snatch him from his mother’s arms; you told him he could stay or leave but, if he stayed, he would have to abide by your rules. From everything you and everyone else has told me, you were tough but you never forced him to stay. Instead, you led by example and he followed you because that’s what *he* wanted to do. Yes, he was only ten years old but he wasn’t an innocent child, Bruce. He was never a child at all; he was raised to be a killing machine, an assassin. You might not have read him Dr. Seuss or gone to school plays, but you tried to give him what you could, and you did it by offering him something they never did which was the opportunity to choose what he wanted to be; a killer or a hero and he chose to be a hero. If anyone stole anything from him it was Talia, all you ever tried to do was give him a better life by showing him a different
way. If you really want to honor your son’s memory then you can start by stop questioning that.”

He expression shifted and he dropped his eyes, “I don’t know, maybe you’re right.”

She snorted, “I know I’m right. You should just get that tattooed somewhere so you don’t ever forget it.”

He kissed her lips gently and pressed his forehead to hers before speaking again, “Still, even after all I’d done to her, even after how I intentionally rejected her time and time again, even after, right or wrong, she accused me of stealing Damian from her; I never thought she’d make good on her threats. Even though she put a half billion dollar bounty on his head, none of us ever thought she could actually kill him just to hurt me…until she did.” He looked at her, his eyes filled with pain, “I think that’s why he left the Cave that night. I had given him express orders to remain there and not follow us but he went anyway. Dick said Damian was confident, cocky even, about the fact that Talia wouldn’t allow any real harm to come to him. I saw the…” his mouth thinned into a grim line as he stopped abruptly and drew away from her, rolling onto his back once more to stare blankly up at the ceiling.

“Saw the what?” She asked, sitting up and carding her fingers through his hair and watched as he took another centering breath.

“I saw the footage later…after,” he licked his lips and cleared his throat before continuing. “There were…security cameras. I downloaded the footage then deleted it from their servers. I didn’t want anyone else to see it but I had to. I had to see…” He took a centering breath, “Even at the end, the last thing he said was her name. He called out for her to stop it because he just couldn’t believe she could do that to him, that she wouldn’t somehow step in and stop the Heretic from finishing him.” He shook his head, his jaw clenching, “He didn’t go gently, Felicity,” he said brokenly. “He--” He stopped unable to go on.

Felicity buried her face in his chest and closed her eyes as the tears began to form and roll down her cheeks. She was crying the tears she knew he couldn’t cry for himself, just like she had once done for Oliver. “I’m so sorry,” she said into his shoulder.

“It’s okay, Baby,” he hushed, nuzzling her hair softly. “I didn’t mean to upset you with this, I’m sorry.”

She offered him a damp chuckle, “Bruce, you’re the one who I’m supposed to be comforting, not the other way around.”
His lips twitched at that even though the pain was still there. “You don’t have to; I already cried my tears a long time ago. I even thought I came to terms with Damian’s death, with Talia, and everything that happened, it’s just that…” He pressed his lips to her hair again and pulled her back down to his chest, “None of this makes sense and I thought it was over, I did, it was supposed to be over. I thought I had come to grips with it, but last night, knowing what she was capable of and how easily she could have hurt you…”

A muscle tensed in his jaw and she made another soothing noise as she stroked her hand down his cheek, “It’s okay, I’m here and we’re okay.”

“I don’t know that though,” he said bleakly. “I can’t know you’re safe until I find her and put her away for good. It just feels like…like I’m cursed,” he said darkly. “Like I’m destined to lose everyone I ever loved and I can’t lose you, too; not now. Not after…not after finally finding you again.”

“You’re not going to lose me,” she told him looking up again. “We fine and we’re together; Talia can’t hurt us as long as we’re together, okay?”

“Baby…” he began uncertainly.

“The only way you will ever lose me is if you choose to push me away,” she told him. “I told you, Talia, Ra’s; no one can make me stop loving you. The only thing that will ever tear us apart are the choices we make for ourselves and each other,” she said lightly, pressing her hand over his heart. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He rolled onto his side and picked up her left hand. “Mine,” he said, kissing her empty ring finger.

“Yours,” she agreed, watching as his face relaxed at that somewhat. “Are you okay now?” She asked as he settled them back down and pulled her into his side so her hand again fell over his heart.

“I’m okay,” he laid his hand over hers and smiled down at her gently. “You’ve always done that, you know.”

“Done what?”
“Been able to fix me,” he said simply. “You take what’s broken and make it whole again.”

“I didn’t fix you, Bruce; you fixed yourself,” she said softly.

“No, that was you,” he traced her face with his eyes. “You…" his eyes crinkled at the corners, “That warmth and light you radiate? It’s addictive. You blind me with it sometimes. You always have a way of bringing the light back into the room and you don’t even know you’re doing it; you just do.”

“I guess that’s only fair since you were the one who always kept the monsters away,” she said with a slight laugh. “You were my talisman when I was a kid; you and Luke. If he couldn’t fix it, I knew you would. You were always my hero and thinking of you always made me feel safe.”

“Keeping you safe is all I’ve ever wanted,” he said, his expression troubled once more. “I’m just afraid that, this time, I won’t be able to.”

“We’re going to figure this out,” she said in an authoritative tone. “This isn’t all on you, Bruce. We’ve got an army of people helping us and we’ve got the advantage here; Talia is going down, I promise.”

“You’re right,” he nodded, relaxing slightly even if it was forced. “I guess I’m still a bit rattled but I do feel a little better this morning in spite of everything. I think most of that is because you’re here and you’re safe as long as you’re in the manor, so that helps a lot.” He began running his fingers up and down her spine again gently as he spoke, “We still need to find her though; soon. I don’t like not knowing where she is or when she’s going to pop back up on our radar. I’m also not happy about her having an army of super powered Amazons under her control. I get what you were saying last night but we need to come up with a better plan than just sitting around and waiting, as well as discuss a few things like how we’re going to coordinate the teams once we get a lock on her location. We may even have to recruit more people depending on what we’re looking at here.”

She ran her hands over his chest absently, enjoying the texture of his chest hair against her fingertips as she traced over his scars, “I agree. I could go downstairs to Watchtower and try to find her, maybe put Barbara on it as well, then come up with a strategy. I definitely need to make sure the system is secure since there’s a possibility the firewalls may have been breached.” She scowled at that, “I’m probably going to wind up having to completely redesign the entire system now. Both systems.” She shook her head, “I know what I said about taking her in alive, but…do you even know how many years of work went into that thing?” She looked at him, her eyebrows drawing together in anger, “I mean, I took a bullet in the shoulder from the guy who wrote part of that code, plus had to dodge machine gun fire in the foundry because someone else wanted it. If I find out she fucked with my coding, I might be tempted to get medieval on her ass. And by ‘medieval’ I mean like the Spanish.
Inquisition with the Iron Maiden spiky sarcophagus thing. Just--” she screwed her face and mimed slamming the door, “Bam!”

“What?” He asked sharply.

“Yeah, I know; I’ll probably just shoot her or punch her in the face or something. Besides, where would you even find one of those things?” She shrugged, “Then again, it is Gotham so—”

“No, when the hell did someone try to shoot you in the foundry with a machine gun?” He asked sharply, his eyes locking on hers.

“A while back.” she said slowly.

His eyes hardened, “Someone breached Queen’s HQ and he’s still operating out of there even though it’s been burned?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to point out that it wasn’t the first time someone had breached the Lair but, luckily, her brain managed to catch it first. “Um, well, it was just a little bit of machine gun fire. Slade, um—before the Blood Army thing—sort of, you know…” she shrugged. “Besides, I reconfigured the Lair security while the team was down so that hasn’t happened since.”

Well, maybe once or twice…

“Not, you know, with machine guns or anything…” she said weakly.

“But it has been penetrated since then?” He asked, obviously not falling for it.

She tilted her head as she bit her bottom lip, “Um…maybe just a little.”

Yeah, okay, maybe he did have a point about moving the Lair to a more secure location but she sure as well wasn’t going to admit it out loud.
Besides, they’d have to rent a U-Haul or something and then there was the whole lifting thing and getting everything set up, dealing with Roy dropping her computers…eh, she’d rather just dodge bullets every once in a while instead.

“Were you hurt?” He demanded.

“When?”

“When Slade breached the damn Lair?” He growled.

“Oh. Other than a few bumps and bruises, no,” she assured him. “Besides, Slade wasn’t really trying to kill me.”

“How do you know?” He asked roughly.

“Well, for one thing, I was the first one down the stairs so if he wanted to kill me he easily could have. Especially since, theoretically, Oliver could have used me as a human shield so taking me out would have made perfect…” her voice trailed off and she saw the muscle in his jaw begin to tick and she swallowed, “I…probably shouldn’t have said that. To be fair, when he started firing at us, Oliver immediately grabbed me and tossed me down the stairs.” His face darkened at that and she winced, “I didn’t mean to imply that he threw me down the stairs or anything, I just meant that he grabbed me and jumped off the stairs *with* me in his arms then, you know, tossing me behind him to shield me with his own body, making *him* *my* human shield and not the other way around.” She cleared her throat, “That was pretty heroic of him when you think about it.”

“You said you weren’t hurt when Slade penetrated the Lair,” he said in a low, dangerous timbre.

“I wasn’t,” she assured him. “I just, you know, uh, bumps and bruises; that’s it.”

He nodded once, “Hmm? And during those *other* security breaches, the ones you’re desperately trying not to talk about; were you ever hurt then?”

Her eyebrows drew together, “Um…not—not really. I mean, not as bad as other people were. Lyla took a freaky boomerang thing to her shoulder but I was perfectly fine other than a bump to the head and, you know, other…um, stuff—*minor* stuff; Band-Aid kind of stuff, not surgery stuff.”
“Right,” he bit out. “When we go downstairs I’m finding Queen and then I’m beating the shit out of him,” he said in a deceptively calm voice.

“Do you really want to start a rumble with Oliver given that we have this Talia thing hanging over our heads?” She asked archly.

“Yes.”

“No.”

“You got hurt on his watch!”

“Band Aid hurt—like a paper cut!”

“A paper cut?” He repeated dubiously. “Really?”

Her mouth opened but the words wouldn’t come out, “Uh…uh huh.”

“Felicity,” he growled warningly.

“Bruce!” She tossed back in the same tone.

Bruce made a disgruntled noise. “Fine,” he told her, “I won’t beat him to a bloody pulp.”

“Thank you,” she said dryly.

“After we get Talia though, all bets are off.”

“Bruce…” she said in exasperation.
“Fine, I won’t beat up Queen,” he said with a sigh relaxing slightly before tipping her chin up and kissing her softly. “The past is in the past; happy now?”

She rolled her eyes at that, “Very, thank you.”

“Very happy, huh?” He asked with a slow grin. “You know,” he said huskily as he rolled to the side to face her, “since I’ve made you so very happy, and since you’ve denied me the pleasure of kicking Queen’s ass, I think I deserve a reward, don’t you?”

Her lips twitched upwards, “What kind of reward?”

He tilted his head up as if needing to ponder that, “Hmm? You know, we never did get to revisit that thing you did.”

“What thing?” She asked in confusion.

“The thing with the angry revenge sex,” he said slowly, using his finger to ease the sheet covering her breasts down until her nipples were exposed then circling them gently as they pebbled from the cold.


He grinned naughtily, “Not that you have to if you don’t want to. I just thought that since you seemed a bit unsure of yourself that you might want to get in a little extra practice.”

“Uh huh,” she said dryly. “That’s very thoughtful of you.”

“I thought so,” he said huskily as he scooted closer and nuzzled her ear, “And I was thinking that maybe I could teach you a variation on that.”

“A variation?”
He hummed, “It’s a special maneuver, one where you get to practice what you want to do to me and I…” his fingers moved under the sheets to trail down her stomach, “get to do the same to you.”

“Well, that does sound intriguing but I thought we needed to get up?” She asked as she kissed his jawline, the stubble from his morning beard tickling the sensitive skin of her lips.

“Oh, I’m up,” he assured her as he rolled her onto her back and moved over her.

“Bruce, we should really get up,” she told him. “And by that I don’t mean,” she looked downwards, “that. We can do *that* later when we have all night to ‘practice’ on each other.”

He made a disgruntled noise, “You’re right,” he said, giving her one last kiss before moving back to the side and staring up at the ceiling in frustration. “It would have been nice to spend the rest of the day holed up in this room though.”

“You know we can’t do that,” she said sympathetically.

“I know,” he said with wry grimace, “I wish we could but…” He sighed and rubbed the hand not holding her over his forehead, “Actually, if we were making wishes, I’d wish none of this had ever happened in the first place.”

“I know,” she said propping her chin on his chest. “I’m sorry.”

“I’d definitely wish Queen and the rest of his crew weren’t here already,” he added.

“They’re here?” She asked, looking to the door. “How do you know?”

“Alfred sent me a text while you were still asleep,” he said, nodding towards his nightstand. He looked at the clock on the wall, “Chances are that he’s planning on serving a late breakfast for everyone soon so we probably should get up, then afterwards we can head out.”

“I’ll call Sara, Laurel, and Lyla, if they aren’t already here, and tell them to leave Katana and the others at the penthouse to stand guard over Creote and Savant,” she offered. “We can coordinate with them later or video conference over Watchtower. I also thought about bringing in the Flash and
his team and maybe a few other masks I know, especially if we’re going to be dealing with metahumans or whatever these Amazons are.”

His brow furrowed, “I don’t think that will be necessary. Not yet anyway.” He released her and sat up in bed, the covers pooled low on his hips, “We need to strategize but it’s way too early to call in back-up. After all, there’s not much any of us can do between the Gala and ARGUS setting up camp in front of the Wayne Foundation building; not and keep the element of surprise. Until we have more information we need to stick to our regular patrols and routines, keep things simple, and put a hold on any major operations until things calm down.”

“The Gala is going to be a real problem,” she said sympathetically. “With all the traffic coming in and out of the building beforehand you just know ARGUS is going to try to get past security and send in their own people if they haven’t already. I wouldn’t be surprised if Talia tried to hack in as well.”

“I think our servers are fairly secure but you can look into that later,” he told her. “I’ll put Barbara on it as well. Normally she’d argue with me that I was being paranoid but now that we know it’s Talia…”

“Yeah,” she agreed ruefully. “Question; why are you holding it in the Foundation Building this year anyway? Why not the MoMA? Their grand ballroom is way bigger than Carousel.”

He shot her a disgruntled look, “The last time someone decided to break into the museum, it left cracks in the roof and, with all the unexpected snow and ice we’ve been having these last few weeks, the Foundation board was worried that having it there could lead to safety issues.”

She frowned, “When was this?”

“It was right before we got back to Gotham,” he told her. “That’s the reason I needed to rush home early in the first place. Tim managed to chase them off before they got anything but not before they damaged the skylight and weakened the roof. The board had to call an emergency meeting about the last minute change of venue.”

“What were they after?” She asked with a frown.

“I have no idea,” he said with a shrug. “The only objects of value being exhibited in that particular section of the museum were some ancient shards of pottery and cuneiform tablets; not exactly the
kinds of things they could take to their local fence.”

She tilted her head quizzically, “You think it was an amateur job and not a member of your Rogue’s
Gallery?”

“That’s all I could come up with since there was nothing of any real value to steal even if they had
managed to breach the roof successfully,” he told her. “The only jewelry in the exhibit were some
primitive beads and headdresses that would’ve been worthless to your average thief and nearly
impossible to sell even in the underground antiquities market. Most people want precious gems or
artwork; things that hold more value to collectors or that can be taken apart and reset or recut. What I
suspect happened was that they thought the skylight would be the easiest way to gain access so they
could get to some of the other better guarded exhibits located elsewhere inside the museum but we
secretly replaced the regular skylight last year with the new shatterproof earthquake glass
WayneTech had been developing and the roof was reinforced with steel plating almost seven years
ago after a similar attempt. They set off some small charges, nothing that even came close to getting
them inside, but that would have shattered the regular security glass called for in the blueprints. They
did, however, manage to do enough damage that we had no other choice but to clear the floor and
shut that part of the MoMA down for repairs. I suspect it was someone with access to the city
planning office but that could be anyone.”

“So you never caught the people responsible?”

“I had been planning on looking into it further but then this Orbital business took priority,” he told
her. “I was actually investigating it the night I ran into you in the alley.”

He gave her a heated look at that and she flushed, “Yeah, I remember that night.”

“So do I,” he rumbled before brushing his lips against hers once more despite her warnings that they
needed to put the hanky panky on hold, “That dress you had on was pretty unforgettable, as was
what you had on underneath it.”

“How would you know? You barely even had a chance to look at it,” she said teasingly.

“Trust me, I saw plenty,” he chuckled, kissing her again before pulling back and running his fingers
down her spine once more. “As for the museum, I thought about having it there anyway, but Tanya
overruled me saying that, between the contractors and the leaking roof, we were begging for a
lawsuit. Not to mention the bad publicity that would come about if someone slipped while doing the
foxtrot and broke a hip.”
“Well, a lot of the older crowd do enjoy going to these things,” she said wryly. “Must be the free bite sized food; you know how cheap the old moneyed set can be. That and the appeal of live elevator muzak.”

Galas were definitely not her thing. While she enjoyed getting dressed to the nines, they were generally boring affairs filled with the same stuffy people talking about the same boring stuff while pretending to enjoy themselves when all she wanted to do was kick off her shoes, tell the band to play something that didn’t sound like a funeral dirge, then find something to eat that wasn’t being served on a soggy water cracker or, God forbid, stale Wasa bread. That reason alone was why Team Arrow had enacted a policy of eating both before and after any and all Galas, meet and greets, or company mixers. And, if she had to wear heels three inches or higher, there had better be bacon involved.

Lots of bacon.

Actually, bacon sounded pretty good. She never did get to eat her dinner the night before, not with all hell breaking loose around them.

Speaking of dinner…

She frowned, “We are going to eat first, right? Because I’m not going unless I at least get a burger out of it.”

“It’s a buffet,” he reminded her with a grimace.

“Yeah, for movie stars and rich society people who don’t eat,” she shot back. “If I have to spend the entire evening putting up with a bunch of rich snobs referring to me as the ‘second wife’s daughter’ and fending off Isabel’s roaming hands, then you need to feed me some real food first.”

At the reminder of Isabel being her official ‘date’ that evening, his scowl deepened. “Fine, I’ll make sure to have Alfred fix us an early dinner or something before we head out. Happy?”

“Thrilled,” she assured him.
“What is it with you and burgers?” He snorted.

“Hey, not all of us have as refined a palate as you do, okay?” She shot back. “My favorite comfort food is cheeseburgers, yours is that weird curried soup—**Mulligatawny**.”

He blinked in surprise, “You remembered that?”

“Yeah, of course; **Alfred** would always make that for you whenever you were on a tough case,” she said off-handedly. “Most people like carbs or junk when they’re upset, you’re the only person I know of who likes spicy stuff when that happens. I mean, besides Oliver. You and he have more in common than you think. It’s like the two of you are purposefully trying to punish yourselves with heartburn.”

“And what’s Queen’s favorite food then? Let me guess; nachos,” he said derisively.

“A) You’re a food snob because nachos are awesome,” she said primly, “And B) Close. His favorite food is **chili**.”

“Chili,” he repeated.

She nodded, “He eats it on everything; the hotter the better. We’re talking disgustingly hot; ghost chili hot.”

“Who puts ghost chilies in Mexican food?” He asked dubiously.

“Oliver; and before you ask, yes, I’ve seen him put them in there,” she told him. “That and habaneros, jalapenos, and every other kind of pepper you can think of. He also dumps a crap load of chili powder in it, like three different kinds, all of which are extremely hot as well. The man’s either a sadist or a masochist; I can’t decide which.”

He frowned at that, “Queen knows how to cook?”

“Well, that’s a matter of debate,” she said slowly. “He *thinks* he can and makes his ‘super secret chili’ whenever the guys get together to watch the game over at Dig’s place. It’s potluck so we all
bring over a dish; I bring a casserole, Lance does something Italian, Thea or Sara buy dessert, Dig makes beer brats, while Roy usually brings the drinks. Chili, though, is Oliver’s go to thing and he always makes it by the gallon, not that anyone but him can get past the first spoonful.” She shook her head and looked at him, “Swear to God, I’m surprised that crap doesn’t melt the pot! During halftime they always have a contest to see who can hold out the longest before chugging down a glass of milk to kill the burn. Hint; Oliver always wins.” She pulled a face, “Of course, I’ve never been stupid enough to try it because it’s completely inedible--I can’t even stand to get near it because the fumes it gives off are worse than tear gas, but he claims it’s the only thing he can cook besides pheasant.”

He looked at her askance, “Pheasant? Chili and pheasant; those are the two things he knows how to cook? Does he put the pheasant *in* the chili, by any chance?” He asked sarcastically.

She paused at that, “It’s possible,” she said with a frown. “Pheasants are basically just wild chickens, right? I know he’s used ostrich and turkey before, not to mention buffalo and sirloin, and I think he said something about venison once…” She shrugged, “Really, it could be anything in there. In addition to all the peppers, he practically dumps an entire bottle of tabasco sauce in it, so who could tell? Anyway, now that I think about it, it might be a mask thing. Barry likes spicy too but his thing is hotdogs piled high with chili and jalapeno peppers. That and spicy fish tacos. Actually, he’ll eat pretty much anything since he has a hyped up metabolism and a healing factor that can heal the holes in his stomach lining before they even form.”

“Right,” he said with a sigh. “Anyway, as to your original question, when the Foundation board came up with the idea of holding it at Carousel, I resisted it at first because I was worried about the loss of revenue the tenants would experience when we had to shut down over the weekend. However, much to my surprise, since the announcement about the change of venue all of our tenants reported an almost 300% increase in profits.” He lifted his eyebrows at that, “The simple fact is that people enjoy the idea of being close to their favorite celebrities even if that means shopping at the same stores or paying to tour the gallery and picking up some postcards from the gift shop. As a result, instead of the backlash I was expecting, the store owners are happy, the board is happy, and after my general manager showed me the numbers, I began to warm up to the idea as well. It also helped that the Foundation Building is far better protected than the MoMA even after we starting introducing the extra security measures.”

“Then again, up until now, the Foundation Building wasn’t exactly a high priority target even being located in the East End,” she pointed out. “That could change with the Gala though. For some reason, your Rogue’s Gallery seem to like these things even more than the Gotham blue hairs do.”

“You may have a point,” he said wryly.

“I ‘may’ have a point?” She looked at him askance, “Seriously Bruce, after the third time someone crashed one of those things you should have just said ‘screw it’ and mailed the bad guys their own invitations. You’ve got to admit, it would have at least saved you the trouble of having to fix the
“I’ll keep that in mind for the next one, but yes, I am not unaware of the fact that this will put all of the security measures we have in place to the test as every psycho looking to make a splash will be keeping an eye on the situation as it unfolds. That was one of the main reasons I wasn’t keen on it in the first place,” he said wearily before rubbing his hand over his rough morning stubble in irritation, “I’ll give Talia one thing; she picked the perfect time to pop back up. Even though I know she probably has something up her sleeve, and as much as I’d love to cancel the Gala and hunt her down, I can’t; especially with that Miller shit still hanging over our heads. Wayne Enterprises needs all the good publicity we can get and me pulling the plug on our biggest charitable fundraiser of the year would definitely attract a lot of negative attention.”

“Seeing as she orchestrated this whole thing, I’m pretty sure that’s why she chose now to do it. You shouldn’t feel bad though,” Felicity told him. “I got suckered, too. I thought it was weird that she would shut down Orbital for the weekend and now I know why,” she said with a grimace of her own before sitting up as well. “I know we can’t do much without tipping her off, but I can at least go down to the Cave and start digging, maybe reinforce the firewalls or something like you asked then begin reconfiguring the code a bit. I can make it look like routine maintenance just in case they do manage to get in through the backdoor to look into the building’s mainframe. Also I can have Mordred look through the systems at Orbital and, if anyone asks, I can tell them that ARGUS has been nosing around so we wanted to make sure they weren’t trying to infiltrate our systems there.”

He nodded, “Do that, and tell Mordred I want to get inside that facility today, if possible. I want to see for myself what’s going on.”

“Way ahead of you,” she said dryly. “I’ll tell him to loop the feeds and disable surveillance so we can get you and Oliver in since he wanted to have a look as well. I’ll get Tatsu to schedule Ted and Booster at the gate just in case Talia’s got the other guards reporting directly to her.” She fell silent then as her mind flashed back to the night of the mission.

His eyes searched her expression curiously, “What?”

“It’s nothing,” she said shaking her head, “It just occurred to me that I need to make sure that one of the other techs, a guy named ‘Dave’, isn’t around while Mordred is going through the system.”

His gaze sharpened at that, “You think this ‘Dave’ is in her pocket?”

She snorted, “More like up her ass. The guy’s a brownnosing little toady. It wouldn’t surprise me if he turned out to be the one who got Isabel the feeds from airport security when Sara left for Starling.
In fact, I’m almost positive of it and I’d like to know what other stuff he’s been up to.”

He took a moment to absorb that, “If he’s her informant, do you think he might know her location?”

“I don’t know but he might have some idea of where she is or how to track her down,” she shrugged. “I’ll have Mordred go through his workstation and monitor all his incoming and outgoing calls and emails.”

“We could just go after him; bring him in for interrogation,” he suggested. “Granted, your approach is more subtle, but if he’s really her inside man and has information vital to the mission, chances are, it won’t be where we can find it easily.”

“I see what you’re saying, and I want to know what he’s been telling her, but I also don’t want to show our cards just yet,” she said wrinkling her nose. “Besides, he’s not the kind of guy I see her bringing in on her plans even though it’s fairly obvious that he wishes she would. The other night he was two seconds from offering to lick her boots.” She rolled her eyes, “I also got the impression that he resented my getting the director job and that, in his opinion, he was supposed to have gotten it instead.” She lifted her eyebrows slightly, “Mind you, that’s purely speculation on my part. He never said anything but his actions kind of gave it away.”

“His actions?” He repeated carefully.

“He didn’t threaten me or anything,” she assured him. “I doubt he’d even have the balls to try something that overt since, like I said, he’s kind of a bootlicking weasel.”

“What did he do?”

She shrugged, “He just kept trying to lead the mission and, every time I’d shoot him down, he’d give me the stink-eye or try to countermand me by kissing Miranda’s ass. However, once I made it clear that I wasn’t going to back down that easily, he folded. Still, he definitely gave me vibe.”

“But before that he was insubordinate during a hot mission?” He asked her carefully.

“No, not really.” She bit her lip and tilted her head to the side as she paused to consider that. She drew her knees up as well and brushed her sleep tangled curls from her face, “Like I told you, it was more like he kept trying to get Miranda’s attention and, when I shot him down, he’d get all pouty and
“Slink off like a whipped puppy in corporate khakis and a polo shirt.” She looked at him with an arched eyebrow, “I mean, he’s definitely a bottom rung IT moron and not a real hacker. You know, the kind of regimented worker bee destined for a lifetime of sitting in a cubicle so, if he is her guy, then I’d think it would be more a case of Talia using his ambition to her advantage than him actually knowing anything of real value. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to check him out.”

He slipped up in the bed to lean back against the headboard and nodded, “Fine, I’ll trust your judgment on that then. Speaking of which, are you sure you can you trust this ‘Mordred’?”

“I think so, I get a good feeling off of him,” she admitted. “I don’t know him that well yet, but J’onn trusts him, and he obviously has a hate-on for ARGUS, not to mention a hacktivist mindset so that’s a bonus. Plus, he’s a real hacker and not just a poseur; we speak the same language and it’s all about the cracking the code and solving the puzzle for us. I trust him enough to know that, if there’s a way to keep Talia out, he won’t stop until he finds it.”

“What about J’onn?” Despite his state of undress and sleep tousled hair, his tone was steady and businesslike indicating that he was 100% Bat at that moment, “Do you trust him?”

“Yes,” she said with a frown. She glanced up at him though her eyelashes warily, “I get the feeling you’re building up to something here so you might as well just say what it is you want to say. Better yet, maybe we should just get dressed and take this downstairs. We need to get a move on anyway and, frankly, I’m a little too naked to deal with Batman right now.”

He ignored her suggestion and plowed ahead instead, “You’ve only known a good chunk of your team for a matter of weeks, some of them for only a few days; just how much do you trust these people?”

“I trust my team, Bruce,” she said uncomfortably. “Look, I get that we need to talk about this but I’d prefer to wait until after we throw on some clothes and maybe put on a pot of coffee.”

“Why?” He challenged.

“Because while I don’t mind talking shop I’d rather do this caffeinated and on even ground.”

“We are on even ground.”
“No, we’re in bed,” she said firmly. “This is not even ground. Let’s get dressed and revisit this downstairs in the Cave.”

“Queen and his people are downstairs and I don’t want to discuss this in front of them,” he told her. “Not yet anyway.”

“Fine,” she said uncomfortably, pulling the covers up around her breasts, not just for warmth, but to maintain a bit of distance because she had a feeling she was about to need it. “First off, most of the people I don’t know well, you do; they were your assets first, so the real question should be how much do you trust them?”

“Renee I trust implicitly,” he told her flat out. “She’s a pain in the ass but she was a damn good cop and she’s a trusted ally, same with Wildcat; he’s unpredictable and a hothead at times, but he’s loyal and I consider him to be an invaluable asset. Katana; I’m not as completely sure of her as I am of Renee and Wildcat since I only worked with her once a few years back, but I know enough about her and her skills to say she’s worth keeping on the team.”

“Worth keeping on the team,” she repeated with a frown. “What does that mean exactly?”

He straightened his posture and looked at her steadily for a moment before answering, “I know I agreed not to intrude, but that was before I knew what we were dealing with here—”

“Bruce…” she said warningly.

He placed his hand on her arm and lowered his voice slightly, “Baby, I trust you, I do, and I’m willing to let Queen and his team in on this mission…”

*I’m* willing to…’, Felicity thought as her temper began to flare. She knew it was just a matter of time before the control freak in Bruce reared its ugly head. The only real surprise was that it took this long for him to speak up.

She narrowed her eyes at him, “But?”

“But you’ve never led a team before,” he said simply. “And after last night, after seeing how your team interacts and how they respond to you as a team leader—”
“Are you seriously trying to fire me from my own team?” She asked snatching her arm away from his touch angrily.

“No!” He reassured her, “Not at all; that’s not what I was trying to say.”

“Then what are you trying to say?”

He shifted on the bed and leaned forward, taking her hands in his once more, “All I’m saying is that I’ve been doing this for a very long time and…” he stopped.

“And?” She prompted. “Oh, and by the way, I have led a team before,” she reminded him.

“Being a mission tech and being a team leader are two very different skillsets,” he told her.

“How do you figure?” She asked, taken aback.

“For one thing, you’ve never been in the field,” he told her. “You can’t lead a team of field operators effectively unless you know what it’s like to be in that position first hand.”

“For your information, I have been in the field before and, yeah, even though most of the time I was ‘just’ a mission tech, I was still the one issuing the orders and making sure my people came home safe and sound.”

He exhaled roughly, “Baby, I’m trying to help you here, okay? I’m not trying to piss you off or take over the Birds; I’m just passing on some of my hard-won wisdom, that’s all.”

“So go ahead then, I’m listening,” she said tightly, not giving an inch. “What ‘hard-won wisdom’ do you suddenly feel a burning need to pass on here?”

“Look, if you don’t want my help, fine,” he said with a grimace. “I’m just trying to be honest with you. You said we should work together, that we should form a partnership, and this is me doing that. However, if you aren’t willing to hear me out or work with me, then we can just drop it.”
She fought down her irritation with him and sighed, “Fine; what is it that’s bothering you exactly? The fact that Helena is on the team?”

“Among other things, yes,” he told her, his expression relaxing slightly. “She’s a murderer who, less than a few weeks ago, threatened to kill you. Hell, she physically attacked you just the other day!”

“We sparred, she didn’t ‘attack’ me,” she said dryly. He gave her a hard look and she shrugged, “Okay, so she attacked me a little bit but I handled her; I *can* handle her, Bruce.”

“Aren’t you sure about that?” He asked her.

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m starting to feel like you’re interrogating me here,” she said, beginning to feel flustered.

“It’s a simple question, Baby,” he said evenly. “How do you know? What guarantees can you give me in regards to Huntress?”

“I—look,” she said, her brow furrowing slightly, “I can’t give you any guarantees when it comes to Helena, okay? In fact, I can’t give you any guarantees about anything because, if this life has taught me anything, it’s that people will always come up with a way to screw things up at the worst possible moment. That said, my gut tells me that Helena is solid—as is the rest of my team.”

“Again, how do you know?” He asked her pointedly. “Before you returned home to Gotham, the only members of the Birds you worked with extensively were Canary and Blackhawk, correct?”

Now she knew she was being interrogated. He totally had his Bat face on.

“And Manhunter,” she added, attempting to regain some control.
He arched his eyebrow at that, “A drug addict and alcoholic with a history of emotional instability and who has been aggressive towards you in the past,” he said dryly. “Also, if I’m not mistaken, she’s only been a field operator for, what? A year?”

“More like a year and a half,” she admitted reluctantly.

“And how much training did she have before that?” He asked pointedly. “Her sister was League, Queen may as well have been, and Blackhawk is ex-military and a former ARGUS agent; where did she train? With who? Is she solid in the field? Is she going to go off the reservation or backslide into addiction?”

She bit down on her frustration and sighed, “Okay, look; Laurel has been studying martial arts since she was a kid…”

He scowled, “Self-defense training is fine for muggers and would be rapists, but knowing how to kneecap a punk isn’t the same thing as being a proven field operator.”

“I realize this, but she has had training,” she said carefully. “It took her awhile; honestly, yeah, a year and a half ago I was skeptical about bringing her into the fold, too. She was headstrong, she thought she could use a Bo staff like a baseball bat, and her fighting stance was for shit. However, that all changed after some intensive training. As for who trained her; Sara and Oliver trained her some, but the majority of her hand to hand and weapons training were through Dig and her father. They’ve both worked extensively with her in developing her skills. Plus, she also got in a lot of experience with Flash and his team when she went down to Central City to take on their overflow so, while I’m not planning on putting her on point here, I think she can handle herself well enough. If she comes up short then her sister and the rest of my team have her back; she’s fine.”

“Baby,” he said uncomfortably, his mouth thinning into a grim line, “I understand that she’s your friend and you want to be supportive…”

“I’m not trying to just ‘be supportive’ here,” she said with a hint of annoyance.

Okay, maybe more than a hint but he was really starting to piss her off.

“Laurel is a damn good marksman, she’s more than proficient with a Bo staff and escrima, and she’s worked with both Team Arrow and Team Flash in the past; she’s solid. Helena is solid. Every member of my team is solid or I wouldn’t vouch for them, friend or no friend,” she said irritably.
He grimaced, “When you’re running hot, ‘solid’ isn’t good enough; you have to trust the guy at your back just as much as you trust yourself,” he said simply. “I know my team, I know what Dick and Tim are going to do before they do it because I trained them. They follow my lead, do exactly as I would do, and follow my orders. They don’t argue, they don’t question me, and they aren’t insubordinate in the field; they do as they’re told--period.”

“First off, that’s bullshit; Tim and Dick argue with you all the time, in and off the field, so try selling that to someone who hasn’t handled your coms,” she said archly. “Secondly, my people follow my orders just fine.”

“You said last night that Huntress argued with your orders during the mission and then she brought up the fact that Gypsy lost her nerve during a crucial moment and had to be talked down. Canary went off book and didn’t inform you of the change of mission protocols. Katana and Blackhawk backed up that decision to keep you in the dark, and the other members of your team are complete unknowns. Wildcat is solid, yes, but he’s not on my team; why? Because I can’t always trust him to stay on book.” He met her eyes directly, “If he thinks he knows better, he will disregard my orders in a heartbeat which is why I rarely bring him in for anything other than extra training. Frankly, the only members of your team besides Renee that I would consider working with, didn’t even bother keeping you in the loop.”

Felicity struggled to keep her expression even as what he said sank in. Was he wrong? No. No, he wasn’t wrong. All of that happened, she knew it, and she could also see where he was coming from, but that didn’t mean her feelings weren’t hurt or that it didn’t piss her off that he could so easily dismiss her ability to lead her own team. At that moment, even though she knew better, it sort of felt like a personal attack.

Had it been anyone else maybe it wouldn’t have affected her quite as much, but this was Bruce. Actually, it wasn’t Bruce, she thought to herself. It was Batman. It didn’t matter that they were both naked or that they had just spent the night making love before falling asleep in each other’s arms; this was Batman and he was telling her that she wasn’t good enough to play on his level.

Yeah, that…that stung. There was no way around that one.

She pulled the blankets a little higher on her chest and wished to God he’d waited until she had clothes on. Right now she not only felt naked and vulnerable under his gaze, she *was* naked and vulnerable. What she really needed was some armor; her glasses, a nice pencil skirt, a tablet she could hide her boobs behind, something. Actually, that was probably why he waited to spring this on her now, she thought. He wanted her defenses down so that when he made his big power move, she’d be more likely to cave.
How very Batman of him.

Part of her had to admire the fact that he had profiled her so well. The old Felicity would have reacted to this sort of soul-crushing blow to her ego by babbling like an idiot thereby proving his argument which was, when you get right down to it, that she didn’t have what it took to lead her own team. After all, what kind of leader was she if she couldn’t even defend her position to her fiancé during a simple Q&A without falling apart and losing her shit (even if said fiancé *is* Batman).

She looked at him. His expression was hard, his eyes serious and uncompromising, but deep in their sapphire depths, she could see it; victory. He knew he had her dead to rights and that there was nowhere left to go.

Game, set, match, Batman style.

Okay, now she was pissed, she thought as hurt turned into a slow burn. The only thing she hated worse than losing, was losing to a sore winner. Luckily for her though, the game wasn’t quite as over as he seemed to think it was. If he was going to go all Bat-hole with her then he was about to meet her alter-ego right back.

Seeking some mental armor before she engaged, her mind’s eye focused on a memory, oddly enough, of when she and Tam were still living at home.

They were lying on the couch in the TV lounge watching the local station’s coverage of Gotham Fashion Week and making fun of the weird and bizarre outfits the models wore as they pony walked down the runway. She couldn’t recall which designer it was, probably Charlie Le Mindu or Pam Hogg, but she remembered it because all the models’ nipples were clearly visible through the sheer fabric of their gowns and one was completely naked wearing nothing but an open jacket, her breasts and pubic region completely exposed.

She looked on in disgust and made a comment, something along the lines of how stupid the designer was to come up with something that impractical because no one would ever dare wear it in public. No one could without getting arrested for public indecency. And, even if you could get away with it, who in their right mind would have the guts to try? What exactly was the point of all that? Her sister then said something that would stick with her for the rest of her life. She said;

“The point the designer is trying to make is that a lot of people think that the secret to being
fashionable is wearing the latest collection, or buying clothes with a certain label sewn into them, but it’s not. It’s not even about how practical it is or where you would ever be able to wear it; it’s about being comfortable in your own skin.” She pointed to the models on the screen, “See them? Do they look embarrassed? No. Know why? Because clothes are a woman’s armor only she doesn’t need armor to be strong. Her strength comes from what’s inside, not from what she’s wearing. If she feels comfortable, confident, and sexy, it doesn’t matter if she’s in a ten thousand dollar gown or a burlap sack, it also doesn’t matter if she’s a size two or a size twenty-two, naked or fully clothed; if she feels powerful and in control, there’s nothing she can’t pull off.” She looked at her steadily, her own posture confident and strong. “That’s what people really react to. If you can keep your head up and own it, then there’s nothing you can’t do.”

Felicity opened her eyes and looked at Bruce. Yeah, he was Batman and, yeah, maybe she wasn’t in his league. Maybe she wasn’t a badass mask who could swing from rooftops or could make grown men pee their pants just by looking at them, but she was Felicity Smoak. She had taken down quite a few big bads herself and, while she couldn’t kick ass like the Bat or the Arrow, it was her voice on the other end of the line that made all of that happen. Plus, if there was one truth her sister had passed onto her (besides the confidence thing and the thing about never buying nylon underwear unless you wanted a yeast infection) it was that, frat boy or big bad Bat, all men could be rendered powerless by a pair of boobs.

She let go of the sheets she had pulled to her chest and allowed them to pool around her waist as she stared at him confident and bare-breasted. His eyes widened slightly as the air between them grew electric, like there was a storm coming and a static charge was building around them.

She took a breath, “While I understand what you’re saying, here’s the thing; the Birds are my team, not yours, and while I appreciate your input and concerns—and while I respect your field experience and leadership skills—you and I don’t run our teams the same way for one very good reason: While you’re primarily a field operative, I’m a handler,” she said pointedly. “I not only know I can lead this team, but I’ve been leading teams for years, only I led them from behind a monitor. You run your team from the field so you see all of the action head-on, but I guarantee you that I see a hell of a lot more clearly from where I’m standing than you do.” She let that sink in for a second, “When you’re in the field, you’re thinking about yourself and about what you need to get the job done at that moment. You think of yourself as an individual and you think of your team as the tools *you* need to get *your* job done in as safe and efficient a manner as possible.” She straightened her back and tilted her head slightly as if she were sitting around a conference table in the middle of the boardroom addressing a group of people in three-piece suits. “As a handler and mission tech, my job is much the same. I want to get the job done, I want to get my people home safe, but I don’t see it as me and them; I see the team as a whole. I see their flaws and their strengths, I see how they fit together like a puzzle, each one balancing out the next. So yes, if I were sending just Helena, or just Laurel out into the field, I would have some concerns; I won’t lie about that. However, that’s not what I’m looking at here.”

“And what are you looking at?” He asked in a way that made it seemed like he was less than
impressed but she had been playing this game with him long enough to know better. He even tried throwing her off with a slightly flirty lilt to his voice as he eyes purposefully lingered on her chest, but she could tell he was a little rattled, both by her sudden shift in attitude and by the way she was speaking to him despite her unclothed state. The self-assured arrogance he’d demonstrated earlier had been replaced with quiet confusion and maybe just a little bit of fear; fear that he may have gone too far due to the fact that she wasn’t looking at him with the eyes of love but with the cool mask she wore every single day that she’d worked at QC.

Good, she thought. Using one of Lance’s favorite interrogation tactics, she stared at him unblinkingly for just a beat longer than was comfortable, making him stew in his juices before continuing.

She arched her eyebrow at him in a superior manner as if addressing some dim IT monkey who couldn’t hack their way out of a wet paper sack, “The Birds are a unit, not an individual. They operate as a unit, each one of them necessary to create a balance of strengths and weaknesses. As for discipline in the ranks or whether or not they’ll follow my orders, I have no worries about that. I know they’ll follow my orders because, even if she had objections, Helena did as she was told, Gypsy did as she was told, and Sara may have gone off-book, but she made a decision in the field that got results and she knew that I would respect that. In fact, I’m glad she did, otherwise my team would be dead and I’m not so set on proving I’m the boss that I would place my ego above their safety.”

She crossed her arms under her breasts and arched her back slightly causing his jaw to clench in consternation at her words while his eyes were firmly locked on the visible proof that the room was a bit on the chilly side. “Sara and Katana are both proven mission leaders, both are trained assassins and skilled martial artists. Lyla is a damn good pilot and expert in firearms, explosives, and counterintelligence. Helena may be difficult but she’s also driven and a force to be reckoned with. Laurel has issues that are being treated, yes; but I have yet to see her backslide. She’s also skilled in hand-to-hand combat, firearms and, even though it took her awhile to learn, I can honestly say now that the only people I’ve seen better than her with a Bo staff are Sara and Tim. As for Wildcat and Renee, I am absolutely confident in the fact that they will follow orders when the time comes and, if they balk or question those orders, then I’m certain that it will be for a very good reason, one that I would be a fool to disregard without hearing them out first. I’m equally confident in the rest of my team as well. However,” she paused dramatically, “if you don’t want to work with the Birds then you’re free to work this mission alone or with Team Arrow and the Birds will work it from our end instead and keep you in the loop as a courtesy just in case we uncover any intel relevant to your investigation.”

That caught his attention. She watched as the shadow of the Bat settled over his expression like a thundercloud, “Talia is my concern and this is my op,” he said succinctly.

“That is also Miranda which makes this our op as well,” she corrected him. “Besides, you wouldn’t even know who she was if it weren’t for me and my team,” she pointed out with quiet assurance despite the visible evidence of his growing agitation. “While I appreciate that you and Talia have history and readily acknowledge that you have the right to proceed as you see fit and can decline our
assistance if you so choose, that doesn’t mean you have the right to order us to stand down.”

“Goddamn it, Felicity!” He burst out angrily, unable to hold back any longer.

“Starling!” She said with equal vehemence, “If I’m stuck talking to the Bat then you can address me by my handle.”

“Felicity,” he emphasized, “this isn’t a game and I don’t have time to deal with a bunch of half-trained masks and loose cannons! Talia--!”

“I’m not playing games here, Bruce; you are.” She fixed him with a baleful glare, “I told you that I would not tolerate you interfering with my team; I warned you. Now, I’m willing to chalk this up as anxiety combined with honest concern, but do *not* think for one minute that I won’t walk out that door if you keep it up.”

His mouth thinned into a grim line at that, “You’re threatening to end our entire relationship, our marriage, over the Birds?”

“No,” she told him simply, “this isn’t about the team, Bruce. If I walk then it’ll be because you’re trying to bully me into doing what you want and I don’t work for you,” she reminded him.

“I didn’t say you did,” he said in consternation.

“I am not a member of your team nor am I here to beg and fetch it,” she said ignoring him. “I won’t be in a relationship were I’m disrespected, now or ever.”

He made an irritated noise and clenched his jaw, “I’m not trying to disrespect you, I’m trying to help you here; nothing I said was meant to be a personal attack on you or your skills as a mission tech.”

“No, it was an attack on my leadership skills and intelligence instead,” she said coolly. “However, believe it or not, I wouldn’t have minded you bringing up those issues in the Cave or even around the breakfast table; the fact that you chose to bring them up in a bed that is supposedly ours, that you are the one, not me, who tried to use my feelings for you as a negotiation tactic, *that’s* what I took umbrage with.”
“This bed isn’t ‘supposedly’ ours, it is ours,” he bit out, “and I wasn’t using anything! I was speaking you the same way I’d speak to anyone I was considering working with! Sorry if you can’t handle that, but--!”

“If it’s ‘our’ bed and ‘our’ marriage, then it needs to be kept separate from ‘our’ missions,” she told him. “I have no problem talking to *you* in this bed, Bruce, but the Bat stays out of it, understood?”

“It wasn’t a personal attack,” he reiterated without acknowledging what she said.

“You chose to come at me while I was naked and in a vulnerable position.” He started to object but she cut him off, “You knew what you were doing, Bruce. You didn’t stumble onto that conversation topic. You planned it, you thought about it, you’ve probably been dying to bring it up since last night, but you waited until you thought my defenses were down to come at me with this in hopes that I’d fold and agree to either give up the Birds or hand control over to you; why?”

His nostrils flared at that, “I’m only trying to keep you safe.”

“And I can appreciate that,” she told him.

“There are too many variables with this ‘team’ of yours, Felicity,” he growled.

“Starling,” she reminded him.

“I’m not calling you that,” he said angrily.

“If you want to get all Batman with me then you treat me with the same respect you would Oliver when he’s the Arrow,” she said flatly.

“If I did that then…” he chuckled harshly, “No, I’m not treating you like I would Queen either so that’s not happening.”

“Whether you like it or not, I have a mission of my own,” she reminded him. “I don’t tell you how to run your team, so stop trying to tell me how to run mine.”
“I’m only trying to help you!” He insisted.

“Would you try to ‘help’ Oliver by calling his leadership skills into question before manipulating him into handing over the reins to Team Arrow?” She asked archly.

“I call his leadership skills into question constantly,” he shot back. “But, to answer your question; no, I would not treat him like I treat you because, first off, I don’t give a shit about him so if he wants to get himself fragged by his own team, that’s on him. Secondly, even though he’s a complete idiot, unlike you he actually has been in the field as something other than a decoy or tech support so he already understands what it is I’m trying to tell you!”

She leaned back and tilted her head at him, “I understand exactly what it is you’re trying to say; you’re saying that I can’t lead the Birds effectively and that you want to cherry-pick which ones you are willing to work with, absorb them into *your* mission, cut loose the rest, and put me back in my place which is safely behind Watchtower monitoring your coms in my bunny slippers, correct?”

He glowered at her, “I wouldn’t put it like that but, yes.”

“Too bad for you then because the answer is no,” she said simply before getting out of the bed and heading to the bathroom.

She grabbed a washcloth off the shelf and headed into the shower, Bruce following closely behind, not even bothering with giving her the semblance of space or privacy. He got a washcloth of his own and shut the shower door behind them, his hands reaching past hers to adjust the spray to the usual blistering hot temperature he preferred.

“I didn’t invite you to share the shower with me,” she told him as she added more cold water to the mix.

“Too bad for you then because I’m not going anywhere,” he told her, adjusting the water back to where it was.

She turned to face him, her mouth tightening into a scowl, “You’re really beginning to piss me off, Bruce.”
“Why? Because I was trying to be honest with you?” He asked her, his jaw set as he looked down at her.

“No, because you’re being an asshole.”

“I don’t think so,” he said, crowding her. “You’re mad because I did what you asked me to and told you what I think. You’re pissed because, instead of saying, ‘Sure Baby, go ahead and run a team of masks if you want to,’ I decided to treat you as an equal and actually call it as I see it!”

“That’s not why I’m angry,” she said defiantly.

“Bullshit!” His eyes glinted dangerously as he glared down at her.

She narrowed her eyes at him, “I’m angry because you tried to manipulate me, not because you were honest about how you felt.”

“I wasn’t trying to manipulate you.”

She scoffed at that, “Now it’s my turn to call bullshit!”

“How was I trying to manipulate you?” He shot back. “How? All I was doing was being 100% honest in my assessment of your team.”

Oh, he’s a slithery one, Felicity thought to herself. He was still trying to box her in, trying to get the answers he wanted to hear so he could chip away at any argument she might come up with. Well okay, two can play at that game.

She tilted her head at him and fixed him with her best ‘get your head out of your ass’ expression, “Okay Batman, since we’re being truthful here, I will readily admit that everything you said in your ‘assessment’ was 100% on point.”

His posture shifted slightly as his brow lifted in surprise, “So you agree with me that, as it stands, this idea of yours to lead the Birds is a mistake?”
“Oh no, I think you’re completely full of shit,” she said blithely.

His mouth tightened, “You just admitted that I was right.”

“I said your assessment was on point, not that you were right; there’s a difference,” she corrected him.

“I’m not wrong about this, Felicity,” he said with a hint of anger. “I’ve been training for this mission for most of my life and I’ve been active for nearly twenty years including the time I spent with the League and with Interpol. I’ve seen more people than I care to think about die or get their own team killed because they trusted the wrong people to have their back. If you can’t control your team, if you can’t trust your team, then either you’ll wind up getting them or yourself hurt.” He pointed to the shower door, “What’s going to happen when you send Huntress out there with the rest of your people and she decides to disregard an order, or simply turn on them, and someone gets killed? What then?”

“Helena won’t do that,” she said firmly.

“How do you know?” He asked her. “Even Queen doesn’t trust her! How do you know she isn’t working for Talia or that she won’t switch sides and betray all of you?”

“I just know!”

“You just know?” He repeated. “Are you willing to bet the lives of your teammates, your friend Sara, me, on you ‘just knowing’ she’s trustworthy and that you can control her? Because I’m sure as hell not!”

“I’m not asking you to,” she said, her eyes flashing. “Like I said before Batman, if you don’t want to work with the Birds, that’s your choice.”

“Why are you still doing that?” He growled in aggravation.

“Doing what?”
“Calling me ‘Batman’?”

“Because that’s who I’m talking to,” she told him.

His eyebrows drew together in consternation, “Goddamn it, Felicity!”

“Starling.”

“I’m not calling you ‘Starling’!” He shot back.

“Then call me ‘Director Starling’ instead, because if you want to come at me as Batman, then you damn well better get used to the fact that you’ll be talking to Starling when you do!”

“You are not a mask!” He bellowed.

“No, I’m not!” She agreed, pushing her wet hair from her face as the steam rose all around them. “You’re right about that; I can’t launch a grappling hook or an arrow into the pitch black and leap from a skyscraper, confident in that I’ll hit my target and not wind up flattened like a pancake on the sidewalk! I can defend myself, yes; fight, shoot a gun, but that doesn’t mean I enjoy it. I don’t work out because I get a thrill from doing sit ups and slapping a Wing Chun dummy; I do it because I don’t like not being able to defend myself, but I have no desire to put on a mask and go looking for trouble!”

“Then why are you even arguing with me about this?” He asked in consternation.

“Because trouble exists whether I’m there to fight it or not!” She told him. “Yeah, I’m not you, I’m not Oliver; I don’t have the same life experiences or skills that brought you to this point, but that doesn’t mean I’m incompetent!” She jabbed her finger into his naked chest and offered him a baleful glare. “You haven’t been around for the last four years so I’m willing to cut you some slack here, but trust me when I say that when it comes to getting my people to where they need to be, doing what needs to be done, I know what I’m doing.”

A muscle began to tick in his clenched jaw, “I don’t doubt that, but--!”
“No buts,” she said cutting him off. “I don’t tell you how to be Batman, so you don’t get to decide whether or not I get to be Starling or how I run my team.”

“You’re my wife!” He growled.

“Fiancée,” she threw back. “Not wife; not yet! And Felicity is your fiancée, not Starling. Even then, a wedding ring isn’t a brand of ownership, nor does it give you the right to make those kinds of decisions for Felicity or for me!” She paused and shut her eyes for a moment, “Goddamn it, now you’ve got *me* talking in the third person.”

“They’re the same person,” he said ignoring her.

“Yes and no,” she told him.

“That doesn’t make any fucking sense!”

“It’s about boundaries, Bruce!”

“I don’t want any boundaries between me and my wife!” He raged. “And I don’t care if you want to call yourself Felicity, Starling, or Mrs. Batman; you are my wife!”

“Fiancée,” she reminded him.

“And I told you that a piece of paper was just that! You’re my wife and even if I have to risk blowing this whole goddamn operation by calling in a judge and getting that sorted today, you’re my wife and I will not stand by and watch you get hurt or killed just because I’m afraid of hurting your feelings!” He shot back. “I love you, I don’t want to lose you, and those ‘Birds’ of yours are nothing more than a collection of misfits, second stringers, and psychos being held together by a hope and a prayer and I’m not going to pretend otherwise even if it means pissing you off!”

“And yet, if I’m not mistaken, you want to recruit Sara, Tatsu, and Lyla,” she said roundly. “So which category do they fall into; misfits, second stringers, or psychos? And what about Renee and Wildcat?”
His nostrils flared at that, “I didn’t say they weren’t worth recruiting, but Huntress? She’s out of control, that girl Gypsy needs a hell of a lot more training before she’s let back into the field, and the rest of them? The security guards, the tatted up hacker, the drunken alien, and the other Orbital operators? They’re dead weight or unknowns and it would be insane to have them on the team before fully assessing their strengths and weaknesses. Even then, your team roster is too bloated and you’re relying too much on people Talia recruited! How can you be sure that one of them hasn’t already informed her of everything we discussed at that travesty of a dinner party last night? Or that they aren’t one of Waller’s plants? Tell me that!”

“I don’t have to tell you anything, Batman; they aren’t on your team, they’re on mine,” she said easily before snatching up the bar of soap and beginning her shower.

“Ignoring me won’t make this go away!” He bit out as she turned her back on him and began to run the soapy washcloth over her body.

“Look, if you want to discuss the mission then I suggest you wait until we’re in the Cave, but right now I intend to take my shower, get dressed, before going downstairs to meet my friends while enjoying my breakfast,” she told him as she snatched one of the handheld shower heads off the wall to rinse the lather from her legs and inner thighs.

“I shouldn’t have to wait until I’m downstairs to be able to talk to you,” he said tightly.

She finished rinsing her body before turning toward him as she reached for the shampoo she’d placed within his shower the night before. She recognized a Bat-sulk when she saw one, “I have no problem talking to you about mission business, Bruce. To be honest, I’m not even mad because you talked about it in the bedroom. What bothered me is that you tried to use our intimate relationship to get what you wanted. You tried to go all Bat on me while I was naked and in our bed, and you tried to make me uncomfortable so you could win your argument.”

“That’s not true,” he glowered but she could hear that tiny bit of poutiness in his tone that said otherwise.

“Don’t even try to hand me that crap,” she said, rolling her eyes at him. “You took a gamble and you lost; you screwed up and now you’re paying the price.”

“And what price is that?” He asked offhandedly even though she could see the hint of panic in his eyes as he waited for her answer.
“The price is that until you learn that I won’t be bullied into giving up my mission, you don’t get to talk to me about it until we’re in the Cave from here on out,” she said firmly. “And when we do discuss mission business, you’ll keep your hands to yourself and refer to me as ‘Starling’, and I, in turn, will refer to you as Batman.”

“And what if I don’t want to?” He asked defiantly.

“Then I just won’t talk to you about this until you do,” she said simply.

He narrowed his eyes at her, “So you’re just going to wall me out until I give in, is that it?”

“Oh, I’ll still talk to you, I just won’t talk to Batman,” she told him. “Or, rather, Felicity won’t talk to Batman but Starling will as long as you keep it where it belongs which is on a professional level… and I’m doing it again,” she said with a sigh. “No, you know what? I finally get why you people talk about yourselves like you’re two totally separate people; again, it’s about boundaries.” She turned until she was facing him fully. “It’s about keeping your personal life and the mission separate.” Thank God for state of the art tankless water heaters, she thought as she stood under the pulsating jets of water before speaking once more, “Consider this me putting up a Chinese Wall from here on out, Bruce.”

His scowl deepened at that, “Meaning what?”

“Meaning that I love you and I want to be with you,” she told him. “I want us to work on both a personal and professional level and, while I get that you’re under a strain right now, I’m not going to spend the rest of our lives fighting over this Caveman bullshit you keep pulling on me!” She sighed, “I get that you love me, I do. I also get that what you were saying, even if you said it the wrong way, came from a place of love which is why I’m not as angry as I should be, but I don’t want to keep running around in circles either.”

His eyebrows drew together at that and he placed his hands on her shoulders, “Are you…?”

“Of course not!” She said with a scowl. “No, we’re still getting married; one fight isn’t going to change that.” She waited for his shoulders to relax then fixed him with a hard eye. “That said, I’m still angry.”

“I know,” he said in a low rumble. “I’m sorry.”
“No, you’re not,” she said wryly.

“I’m sorry about saying it the way I did,” he corrected. “However, I’m also not wrong either.”

“You just can’t take the win, can you?” She muttered. “Fine, you weren’t wrong, okay?” Felicity said, handing him the shampoo. “But you weren’t right either. Either way, Chinese Wall,” she said, gesturing between the two of them. “This discussion is officially tabled until later.”

He lifted his eyebrows as he weighed the shampoo bottle in his hands questioningly, “So…?”

“Just shut up and wash my hair already,” she said with a disgusted look. She turned her back to him again then practically purred as his long fingers began to massage and clean her scalp.

“So now that I’m somewhat forgiven, any chance of shower sex?” He asked in an amused tone as he continued to wash her hair, his fingers gently combing through her curls.

“I didn’t say you were forgiven. I said we were tabling it and that you could wash my hair,” she said flatly.

“Oh well, we probably need to get going anyway,” he said blithely. “Alfred said he’d tell them to expect us sometime before lunch.”

She frowned in confusion, her eyes closed as he began rinsing her hair with the hand shower, “Them?”

He hummed, “Them; as in the lab techs at Wayne BioTech. I told Alfred that we wanted to have some lab work done and needed him to call the doctor’s office to set something up but then he pointed out that we could probably just skip the middleman since they can do a simple blood draw right there.”

She paused, “You still want to do that today?”
“We still need the tests done.” She could hear the frown in his voice.

“Yeah, but what about Talia?” She turned to him, “I just assumed you’d want to put it off until we find her.”

“I think we’ll be okay,” he said, his expression wary. “The facility is closed because of the Gala so it’ll just be us at the clinic. We are okay, right?”

She took a centering breath and laid her hand on his cheek before leaning into his chest under the hot spray, “Relax, Bruce,” she told him. “It’s not the first time you’ve pissed me off and it won’t be the last. All I ask is that you keep our worlds separate from here on out.” She paused, “Well, ‘separate’ is the wrong word. I don’t mind you talking about the mission whenever and wherever you need to, but if you have a problem with me or the Birds then you need to come to me in a professional manner and not try to manipulate me, or emotionally browbeat me into doing what you want me to. Just talk to me. As for our argument,” she dropped her eyes, “I just…I just need you to keep it out of the bedroom until I feel…safe again.”

“I made you feel unsafe?” He asked, instantly concerned. “Baby, I never meant--”

“I know,” she nodded. “And no, you didn’t make me feel unsafe, you just kind of…” she bit her lip, “I just need a place where I can feel…I don’t know how to say it,” she admitted. “I just need a safe haven and you’re my safe haven…most of the time,” she told him, meeting his eyes at last. “You make me feel strong and safe and the way you said all that, it made me feel like you doubted me or that you want me to doubt myself, and while I get that you were trying to tell me what you really thought, you also did it in a malicious manner.”

“I wasn’t trying to be malicious,” he told her, his expression pained. “I was trying to protect you.”

“I know, but…” she made a frustrated noise and looked away.

“Baby,” he said, using the tips of his fingers to lift her chin so she was looking into his eyes again, “I didn’t want to hurt you,” he said in a serious tone, his fingers brushing the wet tendrils of hair from her face, “I never want you to think that I doubt you or cause you to doubt yourself, ever.”

“I know but…” she shook her head, “I’m not asking you to like what I do, Bruce, I’m just asking you to support me the same way I support you, okay? And, if you want to help me, give me advice; fine, I’ll take whatever input I can get, but I’m not you and the Birds don’t operate the way your
team does or the way Oliver’s team does. You don’t have to trust my team but I do expect you to trust me.”

“I do trust you,” he said immediately.

“Then trust me when I say that if I trust my team I know what I’m talking about.” The look he gave her was dubious at best so she added, “Do you trust me to give you the correct information over your coms?”

“Yes,” he said with a grimace.

“And do you trust in the fact that if I thought you or any member of your team were in jeopardy because of Helena or anyone else that I’d tell you?”

He blew out a frustrated breath, “I don’t trust her.”

“I don’t either,” she told him. “Not yet, not completely. Helena has a long way to go but I also know things about her that you don’t. For instance, I know the one thing she desperately wants is to belong to a team.”

“Excuse me if I find that hard to believe,” he said dryly.

“It’s true,” she told him. “Helena wanted Oliver to join her crusade and resented the hell out of the fact that he interfered in her pursuit of her father. She later tried forming her own team and failed, then after she got out of prison—”

“Escaped from prison,” he reminded her.

“Escaped from prison,” she repeated with a nod, “she came back to Oliver to ask if she could join Team Arrow and he again turned her down because, even if she was trying to minimize the collateral damage she inflicted, she was still going about things the wrong way.”

“That doesn’t fill me with confidence,” he told her.
“I’m not defending her, Bruce; I’m merely telling you the facts as I know them.”

“According to what I heard she knocked you over the head after threatening to kill you,” he said with a hard look. “Twice.”

“I’m not denying that,” she shrugged. “If anyone has a reason to doubt her, it’s me, but we’ve had this discussion before.”

“And I still don’t understand why you’re so eager to allow a psychopath onto your team,” he said stubbornly.

“Because she can be saved,” she said simply. “I didn’t always believe that, but that was in the past. Helena isn’t that person who was driven solely by hate and revenge anymore and I know it because I can see it in her eyes. And if I’m wrong, I have Sara to make sure that if and when she does go off the rails she doesn’t hurt anyone.”

“And how exactly would she do that?”

“Knowing Sara she’d most likely kill her.”

“And you’re okay with that?” He asked, his eyes examining her carefully.

“Am I okay with Sara taking her out if she tries to kill me or a member of my team?” She paused, “Yes.”

“Really?” He asked, his expression troubled.

She sighed and tilted her head at him again, “Bruce, I get why you have a problem with that. I’m not fond of killing anyone; I nearly left Team Arrow early on over Oliver’s growing body count, and I’m not okay with her murdering Helena in cold blood, but I also know how far Sara has come. She started off as a League assassin who thought killing people was the most expedient way to deal with things, to someone who tried to do better. Has she killed since then? Yes, but so have I,” she reminded him.
“There’s a difference,” he said tightly.

“No there’s not,” she said flatly. “The only time Sara takes a life now is if there’s no other choice, otherwise she uses a Bo staff instead of edged weapons so she can avoid killing anyone. However, if she thought Helena was going to kill me or anyone else on the team, she’d put her down as quickly and cleanly as possible. So, yes, I’m okay with that because I know how much of an impact something like that would have on Sara. I know that after she takes a life she has nightmares and spends days blaming herself and reliving every horrible thing she’s ever had to do. I practically lived with her on and off for the last couple of years so I know. If she takes a life now it’s not for the sake of expediency, it’s because she had no other way of resolving the situation.”

She gave him a steady look, “It’s about balance, Bruce,” she said, her expression calm and businesslike despite their state of undress and the fact that the steam of the shower was billowing around them in humid clouds. “Sara counters Helena, Tatsu counters Gypsy by acting as her mentor, and Lyla offers up a voice of reason in a sea of hotheaded masks. The rest act as support. You might not see how the pieces fit but I do and, whether you agree with me on that or not, it doesn’t matter. The Birds are my team, Bruce; not yours. I expect you to respect that and to respect me.”

He sighed reluctantly then kissed the palm of her hand, “Okay.” He glanced over at the bottles lining the shelf in the shower, “Conditioner?”

Her lips quirked upwards slightly before she tilted her head up to brush her mouth over his, “I have some leave-in stuff in my make-up bag. Go ahead and finish your shower.”

She turned to walk out and he pulled her to his chest, her back to his front and his hand splayed over her lower abdomen, “You sure? Because the offer of shower sex is still on the table,” he said huskily causing her to shiver slightly.

“You are really a fan of angry revenge sex, huh?” She asked, leaning against him for a moment.

“I’ll admit that I do have a fondness for it,” he said, kissing her behind her ear.

She nodded slowly, “Let me guess; all of this was just some kind of sex protocol where you piss me off so that we can have angry sex followed by makeup sex, right?”

“Maybe,” he said with a low rumble as he weighed her breast in his hand, his thumb teasing over her
She removed his hand before turning to him with a raised eyebrow, “Well, that’s a shame because I’m not rewarding you for any more bad behavior now that I know your game, Batman,” she quipped. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll leave you to take care of that,” she looked pointedly at his erection, “by yourself.”

“You’re a cruel, cruel woman, Mrs. Wayne,” he called out as he began to bathe himself.

“Only good little boys get the cookie, Bruce! Remember that the next time you decide to piss me off!” She shot back as she grabbed a bath sheet from the towel warmer and proceeded to get ready for her day while listening to him chuckle over the sound of the water.

Oh yeah, she was cruel alright.

By the time Bruce exited the bathroom she was already dressed in an outfit she had originally intended to give Sara but, at the last minute, decided to keep for herself despite the fact that it wasn’t something she would normally wear. Still, something about the outfit had appealed to her so she kept it aside, deciding to wear it at least once before turning it over to either Sara or Tam who would undoubtedly launch into yet another teasing round of banter about her ‘boring’ taste in clothes.

She didn’t mind that her sister thought she was a bit boring, though. Tam was right when she said that she had a certain style and that she rarely ever deviated from it. Felicity had always tended to gravitate towards certain silhouettes more than others, mostly styles reminiscent of the forties, fifties, and sixties because they fit her frame better and she was comfortable in them which is what counted. During work she preferred pencil skirts and figure hugging sheath dresses she secretly called by their 60’s moniker; ‘wiggle dresses’ (even though it was more than a bit sexist). She started wearing the wiggle dresses as a joke on Oliver because of the blonde secretary thing but, being completely oblivious, he never got it. She kept it up because she enjoyed the juxtaposition of sexy versus professional they provided. It was her little private rebellion along with her tattoo and industrial piercing that made her feel like she hadn’t lost her edge despite having to live in corporate hell.

Plus they made her ass look amazing.

During her off days, when she liked to look dressed up but not overly formal (not that she had many
of those), she liked A-line skirts, swing dresses, and floral miniskirts that made her feel pretty with a bit of flounce to them. When she dressed down during cold weather days, she liked skinny jeans or leggings and ridiculously soft cashmere sweaters. In the summer she liked cut-out dresses or flirty little sundresses with lots of lace. But more than anything else, she liked color all year round. The more colorful, the better. Put simply, she was not a skin tight black leather kind of girl.

Until today.

Bruce walked into the room and froze just as she was zipping up the tall suede boots she’d chosen to go with her outfit. She straightened up and smoothed her hands over her miniskirt, “How do I look?”

“You look…” his eyes took her in from head to toe and she had to suppress a grin at his heated expression.

Again, to quote her sister, ‘Versace, if nothing else, always made an impact.’

Separately the outfit was rather modest when you thought about it; black leather miniskirt with brass snaps down the front, a matching black silk button-down blouse, black suede over-the-knee high-heeled boots by the same designer with laser cut patterns highlighted in gold, and a black wool blazer with more brass buttons and embellished leather sleeves.

The skirt, while short, was just barely an inch or two shorter than what she would feel comfortable wearing to the office, but (given her petite stature) longer than some of the dresses and skirts she had in her closet. As for the semi-sheer blouse, its impact came from the fact that it was meant to be left unbuttoned to show a deep décolletage while its more opaque pockets hid her breasts to protect her modesty. Like the snaps on the skirt however, the blouse could be buttoned or unbuttoned to the wearer’s personal level of comfort. Even the boots, while high-heeled, were comfortable and covered her leg to just above the knee so that very little skin was showing between the top of the boots to the hem of the skirt. Altogether though, when combined with her lack of glasses, her fresh out of bed tousled curls, and Chanel red lips, the effect was fairly devastating… especially since Bruce admitted just a few days ago that he was curious as to how she’d look dressed head to toe in black leather.

Granted, it wasn’t a cat suit or a leather bustier and biker leathers, but…

She slid her eyes toward him, taking in the look of darkening desire in his eyes.

Oh yeah, this worked.
“I’m sorry,” she said easily, “I didn’t hear that; what did you say?”

He cleared his throat, “I said that you look....” his eyebrows rose towards his hairline as his eyes ran down her figure, “nice.”

“Just nice?” She asked coyly.

“Extremely nice,” he said, his eyes zeroing in on her chest. “Actually, you look naughty and nice.”

She tilted her head at him, “Naughty and nice, huh?”

“Very naughty and very nice,” he said in a low rumble. “On second thought, maybe we should stay in today after all.”

“Roll your tongue back in your mouth,” she teased. “Places to go, people to see, remember?”

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Mrs. Wayne,” he warned her, his eyes running over her once again.

“And you owe me breakfast, Batman,” she told him before turning towards the door.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Hey Baby; one thing though,” he called out as her hand touched the doorknob then gestured vaguely, “Your…?”

She looked down and frowned, “What?”

“Buttons,” he said with a pointed look. “You might want to do something about that unless you want to start a riot.”

“Oh,” she said before unsnapping yet another button open until only two remained closed making it obvious that she wasn’t wearing anything underneath. “Better?”
“Much better actually.” Bruce’s mouth curved upwards slightly, “No bra, huh?”

“Well, I figured since I wasn’t wearing panties, I might as well leave off the bra, too.”

His gaze sharpened at that and he took a step towards her, “My, but you are being a bit naughty today, aren’t you? And what exactly prompted you to be so bold, Mrs. Wayne?”

“Pardon?” She blinked innocently.

He chuckled and stepped even closer until he was just within arm’s reach, “Are you really not wearing…?” He asked eyeing the brass snaps on her skirt as if he could simply will them to open up.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” she said coquettishly.

“I would,” he agreed. His expression intensified and he began to stalk her again, his arms lifting from his sides and reaching towards her, “In fact, I think I’ll find out for myself,” but before he could undo all her hard work, she turned on her heels and popped out the door.

“Uh uh,” she said, clucking her tongue at him from the open doorway. “Busy day, lots of things planned!” She said brightly.

“Oh, you’re going to pay for that later,” he promised her as his eyes followed her figure down the hallway.

“Might as well,” she said turning to admire his own form which was completely bare aside from the low slung towel around his hips. “After all, you’re paying for it now.” She smiled at him toothily, her eyes dipping pointedly below his waistline, “I guess you really do like my outfit after all, huh?” She turned with a swivel of her hips and headed towards the staircase, “Might want to take care of that before you start a riot! See you downstairs!” She called out behind her.

“Brat!” He called out after her.
Oh yeah, she thought. Payback was a bitch.

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Downstairs it was an Arrow family reunion.

Her eyes fell on Laurel and Sara who were both grinning and hugging their father while the others clustered around them.

“Is Lyla here, too?” She asked, looking around for the other woman.

“Nope, but she called to say she’d meet up with us later; she said something about being stuck on babysitting duty.” Dig was the first one to notice her as she entered the room. Or at least the first one to speak anyway, she thought as she caught the look on Oliver’s face as he stared at her with an expression similar to the one Bruce wore just a few minutes ago.

She might have to keep this outfit after all, she thought.

“Wow,” Diggle said as he moved away from the crowd to fold her into his arms, “You look good,” he praised. “Gotham agrees with you.”

“Thanks,” she told him as she squeezed back. “I missed you.”

“Hey, what about me?” Thea asked, pouting comically.

“I missed you, too,” Felicity assured her with a grin, holding her arms open for another hug as Dig released her.

“You could always come back?” Diggle suggested.

“I keep telling her the same thing,” Felicity watched as the look in Oliver’s eyes intensified.
“I thought you said Gotham seemed to agree with me?” She said to Diggle over Thea’s shoulder as she avoided addressing Oliver directly.

“Starling used to agree with you, too. Still can, especially if you start dressing like that every day,” he said with a playful wink.

“What; this old thing?” She said teasingly.

“Right,” Thea said as she drew back to eye her outfit with a grin. “And where exactly did you have that hidden; behind your drawer full of warm and fuzzies? By the way, I call dibs on that outfit.”

“No way!” Sara said from beside her father and sister. “If it’s black and leather, it’s mine!” She grinned smugly, “Besides, she totally bought that for me anyway.”

“How do you know?” Felicity threw back over Thea’s shoulder only to have Sara give her a knowing look, “Okay, yeah, totally did.”

“That’s not fair,” Thea said with another pout as she finally released her, “I haven’t gotten to steal any of your clothes in forever. Especially since Ollie apparently trashed all of them when he was busy wrecking your house.”

“Hey!” Oliver said defensively before shifting uncomfortably, “I didn’t trash all of them,” he muttered. “Wayne trashed most of the clothes, I just took out the kitchen.”

“Well, you’re in for a treat because if you thought Felicity’s ‘closet’ was impressive you should see her sister’s,” Sara told her. “Plus she’s hot.”

“I do not want to hear this,” Lance muttered as he shook his head at his youngest daughter.

“I kind of do,” Tim admitted from where he was seated at the counter. At Lance’s pointed look he shrugged, “Her sister’s my girlfriend so…” The older man narrowed his eyes and he swallowed, “And shutting up now.”

“You girls are going to send me to an early grave,” Lance said dourly as he ignored the younger man.
to sweep his eyes over the women.

“Seriously, you need to come home,” Dig told her. “Somebody needs to help me keep these idiots in line.”

“Dig’s right,” Thea told her. “Everybody misses you; you have no idea! I tried telling Roy to get his head out of his ass the other day and he nearly burst into tears then spent the rest of the day staring at your empty chair.”

“Stop hogging her,” Lance said gruffly as he moved closer to pull her into an embrace as well. “You doin’ okay, kiddo?”

“I’m good,” she assured him.

“Well, Dig’s right; we want you to come home but you do look better, like you’ve actually been sleeping for eight hours at a time instead of just sneaking in an occasional catnap,” he noted, his eyes running over her features. “Speaking of how you spend your nights, I hear you have some explaining to do,” he said, one eyebrow raised in a daunting expression. “What? You couldn’t call; phones don’t work up here in Gotham? I want you to know I had to hear about this crap third hand then take out vacation time just to come up here and find out what the hell you were thinking getting involved in all this Orbital crap. Not to mention all this other stuff,” he said gruffly as he looked around the kitchen.

“Other stuff,” she repeated wryly then nodded, “You’re mad about the Batman thing, right?”

“I sure as hell ain’t happy about it,” he tossed back. “Just who does this joker think he is coming to drag you off to the scum capital of the world?”

“Careful,” Dig said dryly, “From what I hear they take expressions like ‘joker’ pretty seriously around here.”

Lance’s lips curled up in disgust at that, “I’ll bet. Hell, this city’s crazies make ours look like a bunch of thumb-twiddling mental cases that can be fixed with a group hug and some basket weaving! Still, that’s not even the worst part; the worst part is that, not only did you skip town without so much as saying goodbye, but that I gotta hear about you marrying this guy from them.” He gave a brusque harrumph at that and eyed her with stern disapproval, “Well, while I don’t blame the guy for recognizing quality when he sees it, you oughtta know better by now! What the hell were you
thinking hitchin’ your wagon to the only mask more screwed up then this guy,’” he demanded, tossing his head towards Oliver. “Not that I was too thrilled with the idea of you gettin’ with him either.” He looked at the man in question, “No offense.”

“None taken,” Oliver said wryly.

“What can I say, Detective; apparently I do have a type after all,” she said with a grin as she stepped out of his embrace.

“That and lousy taste in men,” Dig joked despite the censuring look Oliver was shooting in his direction.

Lance nodded in agreement, “Yeah, well we knew that after the third mask started sniffin’ around but at least you had enough sense to send all of ‘em packing! If you ask me, all these girls could use some improvement in that area,” Lance said eyeing each one of them in turn. “I keep telling you girls that they’re called ‘bad boys’ for a reason, but do any of you ever listen? No.”

“That’s because bad boys are more fun,” Thea said mischievously. “They tend not to break as easily.”

“That and they have nicer toys to play with,” Sara agreed with a naughty twinkle in her eye.

“Knock it off,” he told Sara then looked at both of his daughters in annoyance, “What about you two? What kind of trouble have you been getting into up here?” He asked before turning his full attention onto Laurel. “You aren’t involved with any of these guys, I hope? It’s bad enough that your sister got us dragged into that League of Assassins nonsense with Nyssa; the last thing we need is for you to get caught up in all this Bat shit, too.”

Tim snorted then muttered, “‘Bat shit’.”

“The point is that you girls are supposed to have Felicity’s back, not encouraging her to get dragged further into this crap by going along with it! I’d hope the two of you have more sense than that.”

“So, in other words, being involved with Bruce makes me somehow mentally defective?” Felicity asked with an arched eyebrow even though she didn’t take the detective’s gruff demeanor seriously.
Truthfully there were days when he might actually have a point, today being one of them.

“I haven’t met the guy yet, but my gut is telling me yes,” he said bluntly.

“Actually, I was the one who wanted her to dump him less than five minutes after meeting him,” Laurel said dryly. “On the other hand, Sara was the one flirting with him for half the night.”

“I wasn’t flirting,” Sara said in consternation before pursing her lips, “Well, maybe a little but only in a package deal kind of way.”

Lance gave his youngest a quelling glare, “Yeah, well, your sister’s track record in that regard isn’t exactly working in her favor either.”

“Hey!” She objected.

“One word; Nyssa,” he told her. “I could use more words, like gettin’ on a boat with that one,” he said hitching his thumb towards Oliver again, “but I decided to leave the past in the past—no offense,” he said, looking at Oliver again.

“None taken,” he said tightly.

“As big of a dumb ass as the kid used to be and, frankly, still is, he’s at least somewhat better than a League assassin,” he told her. “Not by much, but still.”

“You are really not his favorite person, huh?” Tim muttered to Oliver.

“To say the least,” Oliver agreed, rubbing his temples with a pained expression.

“Technically, Nyssa is in the past, too,” Sara grumbled to herself. “I broke up with her months ago but do I get any credit for that? No.”
“The point is, of all of these girls, you should know better than to get yourself mired down with this crap when you’re supposed to be focusing on your recovery!” Lance said to Laurel, ignoring her. “All I have ever wanted for you girls is to make smart, healthy decisions for yourselves and to have a happy life with someone normal and not someone who runs around town in a bat costume or who shoots arrows at people!”

“Dude, and I thought Lucius was tough, plus this guy is on your team and everything; at least I have a place to hide out until the danger has passed. You, on the other hand, are like totally screwed,” Tim said sympathetically.

“Yep,” Oliver breathed.

“I haven’t been getting into any trouble nor am I ‘involved’ with anyone,” Laurel said archly. “I’ve been going to meetings, I’ve gotten myself a sponsor, and I moved in with Sara and Felicity, so I’m good.”

“But you still got yourself mixed up in this Orbital crap without telling us,” her father pointed out.

“Yes, but if I had told you what was going on, you would have said go because Sara and Felicity needed help, right?” She asked pointedly.

Lance scowled at that, “Maybe.”

“No ‘maybe’ about it,” she said with a snort. “As for worrying about our love lives or lack thereof, I’m not involved with anyone, nor do I plan on being involved with anyone for the foreseeable future. The only person here dating anyone besides Felicity, is Sara, not me.”

“Wait, what?” Lance’s head swiveled towards his youngest daughter, “You’re dating somebody here in Gotham? It’s not one of these guys, is it?”

“She’s seeing Felicity’s brother,” Laurel said, answering for her.

“The schoolteacher?” Lance said in surprise.
“Kind of,” Sara said, throwing a smirking Laurel a nasty look. “I wouldn’t exactly say we’re dating though…”

“No, don’t ruin it for me,” he told her. “I’m just glad that, for once, one of my daughters is dating someone normal and not some masked vigilante.” He glanced at Oliver, “No offense.”

“No problem,” he said darkly.

“Well…” Sara began sheepishly.

“All I ask is that you give me a minute or two to enjoy the fact that not only are you dating someone with a real job, but that he comes from a nice, normal family instead of being the heir to a homicidal maniac or something.”

“Well, that’s true,” Sara mused. “From what I could tell, Mr. Fox is definitely not a homicidal maniac.”

“Depends on whether or not you’re dating one of his daughters,” Tim said wryly. “Then that man is absolutely terrifying.”

“Sounds like my kind of guy,” Lance said with a smirk as he spared the younger man a look. “I wouldn’t want you dating one of my girls either, kid.”

“Hey, I’m a great guy,” Tim told him. “Respectable, hardworking, earnest, good with money; I’m a catch.”

“You’re an idiot,” Lance said, rolling his eyes at him. At Tim’s protest he waved him off, “You’re in good company though; all of these guys are idiots, myself included. Still, I’m looking forward to finally meeting your dad,” he said, turning to Felicity. “It’ll be nice to sit down and have a conversation with someone not involved in all this vigilante crap for a change. Plus, I want to meet this brother of yours.” He grinned and rocked back on his heels slightly, “A schoolteacher; about damn time one of my girls wised up and decided to date someone normal for a change. I haven’t even met this kid and I like him already.”

“Yeah,” Sara said slowly, “About that…”
Felicity looked at Tim, “So I take it that nobody told him yet?”

Tim shrugged, “I guess it slipped my mind but, in my defense, it’s been kind of busy.”

“What? What am I missing?” Lance asked, looking around at the amused expressions of his companions.

“Detective…” Felicity began, “First off, my dad knows about Batman.”

“He knows?” He said slowly, “How much does he know? He’s not part of this mess, is he?”

She wrinkled her nose at that, “Not directly, but let’s just say that the two of you have a lot in common. I mean, he knows and he’s somewhat involved, but he does the whole ‘mutual friend’ thing a lot in order to avoid talking about it head-on. Also, you should know my sister is aware as well since she’s been seeing Tim for a while now.”

“Damn,” he said with a sigh. “Well, at least your brother’s normal, right?”

“Actually,” she began reluctantly, “he’s, um, he’s…Batwing.”

Lance’s brow furrowed in consternation, “What the hell is a Batwing?”

Tim, who had unfortunately picked that moment to sip some orange juice from the glass in front of him, began to choke and sputter with pained laughter, “Ow!” He gasped, “That burns! Orange juice and sinuses don’t mix!” He howled, reaching for a dishtowel.

Felicity rolled her eyes at him before answering Lance’s question, “Luke is a mask. He’s part of Batman’s mission and works out of Africa under the handle ‘Batwing’.”

“Damn it, I should have known,” Lance grumbled before fixing his youngest daughter with a hard look, “Why can’t you girls just settle down with some nice, normal working stiff for a change? You
know, if it’s the adrenalin junkie thing you’re attracted to then try dating a firefighter or a cop or something! Hell, if you’re that determined to live in the edge then date the mailman; I don’t care, just somebody who doesn’t swing from the goddamn rooftops or shoot people with arrows!” He looked to Oliver once more, “Again, no offence.”

“No problem,” the other man said even though the growing irritation on his face said otherwise.

“If it helps set your mind at ease, Peggy Ann is completely in the dark,” Felicity assured him.

“So I should feel better about all this because the grandmother doesn’t know?” He asked sarcastically.

“Yeah, I’m not so sure about that,” Tim said with a scowl. “That old lady hates my guts and I’m pretty sure it’s about more than just me borrowing some sugar.”

“Sugar?” Diggle asked in confusion.

“It’s, um, an inside joke,” he said with a flush.

“To be fair, I tried to date someone normal but Felicity wouldn’t go for it,” Sara said blithely.

“Thank you for dragging me into this,” she said wryly.

“You already were in this,” Sara shrugged, “Besides, if you really cared then you’d stop breaking my poor father’s heart and just take me up on my offer to buy a cat together and live happily ever after in queer girl bliss.”

“You joke but I would love it if you wound up with someone like Felicity,” the detective said gesturing towards the woman in question. “That goes for you to,” he said turning to his other daughter as well.

“Felicity’s nice but she’s not really my type,” Laurel said dryly.
“Are you sure about that?” Sara muttered in her direction.

“Knock it off,” Laurel whispered, narrowing her eyes at her sister.

Lance, however, was still too much on a roll to notice. He turned to Felicity next, “If you have to keep dating these damn masks, I would much rather you be with someone like Sara than with this Batman character or…him!” He looked at Oliver, “Again—”

“I know, ‘no offense’,” Oliver practically growled in return.

“What’s his problem?” The older man asked Diggle quietly as he hitched his thumb at Oliver.

“He was never a morning person,” the other man said with an amused shrug.

“The point is, what’s wrong with finding someone normal?” Lance asked, his eyes sweeping across all four women including Thea.

“Don’t look at me,” Thea said, moving to sit next to a snickering Tim. “The closest thing I’ve had to a date in the last six months is when I spent three bucks to sit in a vibrating massage chair at the mall.”

“I…really wish I hadn’t heard that,” Oliver said slowly.

Tim blinked at a smirking Thea, “Now I kind of want to go to the mall.”

“Hey, Dad; Laurel’s dating a cop. That’s normal, right Laurel?” Sara said, turning her twinkling eyes towards her sister.

“No,” she said, shooting daggers at her sister who turned to mouth the words ‘payback bitch’ in her direction.

“Yeah, you are; right Felicity?” Sara said with an innocent look.
“Laurel’s dating a cop? Really?” Lance said hopefully turning to her as well. “But you just said you weren’t dating anyone.”

“I’m not,” Laurel said in exasperation.

“Yes, she is; she’s just in denial,” Sara said smugly.

Laurel scowled at her, “I am not in denial!”

“Oh, yes you are,” Sara grinned. “It’s not just a river in Egypt, you know. You’d think they would have covered that in rehab between the hot yoga sessions and the coffee enemas.”

“I hate you,” Laurel told her sister with narrowed eyes.

“Who are you seeing?” Lance asked her again.

“I’m not seeing anyone!” Laurel insisted. “Sara is just kidding.”

“No, I’m not,” the other woman said blithely.

He grimaced and turned to both his girls, “You know what? I don’t know if you’re seeing anyone or not but I do know that I don’t trust you; either of you.”

“That hurts, Dad,” Sara pouted in mock sincerity.

“Whatever,” Lance said dismissively then nodded towards Felicity. “Her, at least, I know I can trust to tell me the truth.” He turned to her fully, “Is Laurel dating a cop or are these two just jerking my chain?”

“Do you ever get the feeling that Felicity is his favorite kid even though she’s not actually related to us?” Sara said in mock confusion as she turned to her sister.
“All the time,” Laurel said with a grimace.

“Laurel isn’t dating a cop,” Felicity assured him.

“Thank you!” The woman in question said in exasperation.

She nodded, “Renee is an ex-cop.”

“Renee?” Lance repeated with raised eyebrows.

“Wait, you’re dating Renee?” Tim asked excitedly.

“Who the hell is ‘Renee’?” Lance demanded.

“Renee is a friend. She’s just someone I met recently, that’s all; we’re not dating,” Laurel said firmly.

“So you’re *just* friends…” Sara repeated slowly.

“Yes,” Laurel told her with a hard glare.

Sara pursed her lips at that, “Friends who flirt.”

“No,” Laurel denied angrily.

“You were flirting last night and then again in the kitchen this morning when you got back from patrols,” she said firmly. “Even Luke asked about it after you said that line about the Pop Tarts.”

“What line?” She asked with a frown.
“You started moaning about how much you loved blueberry Pop Tarts but that it wasn’t very filling, and then Renee offered to give you something else to satisfy your cravings, so you threw back that line about how big your appetite was and how it couldn’t be satisfied with just a tiny nibble.”

“I was not flirting with Renee,” she denied. “We’re friends, it was just friendly banter between, you know, *friends*. Stop trying to make more of it than it is!”

“Wait; one thing first,” Lance said holding up a hand to stop his daughters’ bickering, “Renee?”

“What about her?” Laurel asked him in exasperation.

“And there’s my answer,” he said slowly.

Sara raised a superior eyebrow at him, “But you don’t have a problem with that, right Dad?”

“Depends,” he said, eyeing both of his girls suspiciously, “This Renee a mask, too?”

“What’s going on?” Dick asked as he entered the kitchen and frowned at everyone’s tense expressions.

“Laurel just told her dad that she and Renee are totally into each other,” Tim garbled around a mouthful of cereal.

“Oh,” he said with a shrug before getting a bowl from the cabinet.

“I’m not ‘into’ Renee,” Laurel said, her cheeks flushing slightly. “We’re just friends!”

“Are you sure?” Dick asked as he got out the milk and poured some of Tim’s cereal into a bowl. “Because you guys seemed to really be hitting it off. Plus you planned that whole date night thing,” he said, lifting a spoonful of colorful marshmallows toward his mouth.
“What date night thing?” She asked him in consternation.

“The blowing up stuff then going for burgers and shots afterwards thing,” he answered as he munched on his cereal.

“Goddamn it!” Lance huffed, glaring at all of them, “I thought you girls agreed to knock that shit off after the last time when you nearly blew up the entire warehouse district!”

“I don’t remember agreeing to that,” Thea objected.

“Me either,” Laurel said with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Dad, come on; you know you liked the fireworks just as much as we did,” Sara said roundly.

“No, I didn’t!” He snapped. “I also didn’t like having to do the mountain-load of paperwork or having to deal with Homeland breathing down my neck afterwards!”

“Homeland?” Bruce asked as he entered the kitchen, his still damp hair curling over his forehead as he looked over the group of people cluttering his kitchen. “What’s going on?”

Tim wiped his mouth on his napkin before pointing his spoon towards Laurel, “Okay, so Laurel’s dad is pissed because Sara,” he pointed to the blonde next, “is seeing Luke so she tossed Laurel under the bus,” he motioned towards the fiery brunette next, “and told him that she’s seeing Renee, then Dick,” he gestured off-handedly towards the man eating cereal across from him, “brought up the fact that they were planning on going for burgers after blowing stuff up.” He looked at Bruce, “By the way, I really like having houseguests; it’s nice seeing other people get yelled at for a change.”

“Speaking of which, is this a one on one date or a group thing because I want to go blow up stuff, too,” Thea said looking between them. “It’s been a while since we’ve done a Girl’s Night and I kind of miss it.”

“No one is blowing anything up!” Lance said firmly.

“But it’s like tradition!” Thea cajoled.
“She’s right,” Sara nodded. “Girl’s Night means bonding, bombs, burgers, then booze.”

“The four ‘B’s’ of the Birds of Prey,” Laurel said wryly. “Well, in my case, the three ‘B’s’ but whatever. I’ll just stick to Shirley Temples and Virgin Margaritas or something.”

“I don’t care; no one is blowing anything up!” Lance insisted. “You girls want to ‘bond’ then you can go get your toes painted or your hair done or something!”

“What do you care?” Sara asked him. “It’s Gotham, not Starling; someone else has to do the paperwork, not you. Plus Felicity found a really great lesbian bar for us to hang out at afterwards.”

“Really?” Thea said eagerly. “I haven’t been to a decent girl bar in forever!”

“What?” Oliver asked with a frown as he turned to his sister. “Since when do you hang out at lesbian bars?”

Thea rolled her eyes at him, “We used to hang out at girl bars all the time whenever we could get away from the club. They always have the best music plus no creepy guys hanging all over you and stinking of cheap cologne and beer.”

“No one is blowing anything up,” Bruce said with a grimace as he moved to stand near Felicity.

“You just don’t want them blowing up any of your stuff,” Felicity said dryly as he placed his hand on the curve of her back and kissed her hair lightly in greeting.

“No, I do not,” he agreed dryly then glanced over at the empty coffee pot in consternation.

“Which, when you think about it, is kind of greedy,” Laurel said blithely. “Especially since, according to Renee, you blow stuff up all the time.”

“You do like to use those missiles a lot,” Tim noted with a frown.
“Laurel and Tim are right; if you get to play with missiles and a tank, the least you could do is let us set off a few tiny M183 charges for Girl’s Night,” Felicity agreed with a playful smirk.

“No one is blowing anything up, Girl’s Night or not,” he repeated firmly as he gave them a chastising look before extending his hand towards the detective. “Hello, I don’t believe we’ve been introduced yet; Bruce Wayne.”

Lance eyed his hand without moving to extend his own, “Yeah, I got that,” he said flatly before narrowing his eyes at him. “So you’re Batman, huh?”

“I am, yes,” he said, observing the older man coolly as he allowed his hand to drop to his side.

Lance gave him an unimpressed look, “Right. I hear you’re thinking of marrying our girl.”

Bruce’s eyes narrowed slightly at his choice of words, “I’m not thinking about anything,” he told him evenly, “Felicity and I are getting married as soon as we settle this Orbital business once and for all.”

“We’ll see,” he said dismissively causing Oliver’s mouth to twitch upwards while Bruce stiffened in annoyance. Ignoring him, he turned back towards his eldest daughter, “So tell me about this ex-cop you’re seeing; what’s her story anyway?”

“I’m not dating Renee,” Laurel said with a sigh. “She’s just a friend I met here in Gotham who offered to be my sponsor.”

“She’s in the program?” He asked.

“Yes.”

He nodded, “What’s her last name?”

“Why? Are you going to run a background check on her?” Laurel asked sarcastically.
“No, I’m gonna have Felicity run one on her,” he shot back. “The most I could dig up is her official police file, but she can get me the really good stuff.”

“You’re dating Renee?” Bruce asked with a frown.

“No!” Laurel said angrily. “For the last time, we’re just friends; I’m straight, remember?” She said turning to her father after shooting Bruce a dirty look. “That kind of rules out me dating another woman.”

“Yeah, well, I thought your sister was, too, until she came home with that Nyssa person,” he shot back.

“Not that he has a problem with that,” Sara said again with a smirk as she leaned over Tim’s shoulder to snatch the box of cereal off the counter and pop a few marshmallows in her mouth.

“I didn’t have a problem with her bein’ a girl,” Lance said, giving his youngest daughter the stink eye. “I did, however, have a problem with her poisoning your sister before kidnapping your mother, not to mention the fact that she was an assassin!”

“Nobody’s perfect,” Sara muttered putting down the cereal box with a huff.

“Besides, human sexuality is a sliding scale,” Tim garbled helpfully around another large mouthful of cereal. “For girls anyway.” All eyes turned on him revealing a range of annoyed expressions. “What? It’s true...at least it is according to late night cable.”

Lance shot the younger man a warning look before again turning towards his daughter, “So what’s this girl’s story anyway? Why’d she leave the force?”

“Dad, I told you; we’re just friends,” Laurel insisted.

“She’s still your sponsor, right? So sue me if I want to make sure this ‘Renee’ person is on the up and up.”

“Renee’s solid,” Dick spoke up from across the room, causing Lance to shift his gaze towards him.
“Hi, we haven’t been introduced yet; Dick Grayson,” he said, putting his bowl in the sink and wiping his hands on his jeans before walking over and holding out his hand in greeting.

“Hmm,” the older man hummed looking just as unimpressed with him as he did with Bruce. “And just why should I take your word for that?”

“Uhh,” Dick shifted uncomfortably before answering him, “Well, I’m Nightwing for one.”

“Yeah,” the other man said slowly, “You bein’ a mask doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence, kid. Try again.”

“Tough audience,” Dick murmured with a sigh. “Okay, well, I was also on the Bludhaven PD for a couple of years before I took on my own team,” he said hopefully.

“You went through the academy?” He asked, his countenance softening somewhat.

“Yes sir,” he told him.

“Why’d you leave?”

“I found out I could do more as Nightwing than I could as a patrolman,” he admitted. “Not that I regret my time on the Bludhaven PD,” he added. “I made a lot of valuable contacts and helped clean up some of the corruption within the force but being a cop wasn’t what I wanted to do for the rest of my life; this is.”

“Yeah, Bludhaven’s a rough city alright,” he agreed gruffly. He turned to Laurel, “If you have to date one of these people then what’s wrong with this one? I mean, granted, he still likes to run around town in a costume but at least this one went through the academy and he looks like he’d clean up nice,” he shrugged, “I mean, he could use a haircut and a shave but you could make do.”

“God…” Laurel breathed, covering her face in embarrassment.

“Okay…” Dick said slowly, suddenly caught off guard as Tim began snickering rudely.
“God, I love Detective Lance,” he said sincerely as he looked to Sara, “Seriously, your dad is a hoot. This has been a helluva fun week for me. This is almost as much fun as when he told Roy the other day to stop admiring his girlish figure in the mirror and move his ass or he’d take away his pretty red suit permanently.”

“Sounds like dad,” she said with a smirk.

“Yeah, and then he made fun of his hair,” Tim nodded. “Kept calling him ‘Bieber’ the entire night. I had Barb save me a copy of the audio file.”

“Yeah, well, he does look like that Bieber kid half the time,” Lance griped, obviously on a roll, “Still, at least Harper knows how to shave and comb his hair properly, the rest of you go around looking like you spent the night in a cardboard box! What; you think running around lookin’ like a bum all the time is attractive? Tell ‘em, Dig.”

“Man, I am not getting in the middle of this,” the other man said then raised an eyebrow in amusement, “Even though I’ve kind of been wondering about that myself for a while now.” Oliver threw him a dirty look causing the other man to raise his hands in a gesture of peace, “I’m just saying that the only part of your face not covered by the hood is your beard. You’d think, if you were really concerned about hiding your identity, you’d want to shave every once in a while; that’s all.”

“I don’t always have time to shave, okay?” Oliver said bad-temperedly.

“Really? Uh, huh; I work the same hours you do and I seem to find the time,” Dig pointed out.

“Exactly!” Lance said triumphantly, “I mean, one look at that jaw of his and I knew exactly who it was under the hood.”

“Then why didn’t you arrest me back then?” Oliver grumbled back.

Lance snorted, “I did arrest you, genius; or don’t you remember?”

“Look man, if you like the Miami Vice look, more power to you. I don’t care either way, I’m just saying that he has a point, that’s all,” Dig said, “Oh and, by the way, you owe me a thousand bucks
since I already settled up with Roy back home.”

Oliver sighed and rolled his eyes heavenward before reaching into his back pocket to pull out his wallet.

“What was I sayin’?” The older man grumbled. “Oh yeah, this kid.” He looked back to Laurel while pointing at Dick, “All I’m tryin’ to say is that, if you have to go for one of these guys, why not take this one to the barber, have them clean him up a little, then try datin’ him for a while and see if it sticks.” Lance turned to Dick, “Wait, I’m sorry, kid; you aren’t already involved with anybody, are you?” The older man asked. “I don’t want to put you in an awkward situation here.”

“Too late,” Laurel said with a grimace.

He blinked, “Um, no. Not—not dating anyone, no.”

“Married?”

“No, sir.”

“But you do like girls, right?” Lance frowned, “No judgment if you don’t, just askin’.”

“Yeah,” he said with a scowl. “I mean, yes, I like girls.”

“Yeah, but only if they’re redheads,” Tim offered, ignoring the other man’s dirty look.

“See?” Lance said to his daughter, “He’s available; date him. I’m sure the redhead thing is negotiable, right?” He asked looking at Dick.

“Um, well…” he began.

“First off, I only just met Dick a few days ago,” she told her father with a scowl. “Secondly, I’m not actually dating anyone right now, remember?”
“Plus, he’s a mask, too,” Felicity reminded him.

“Yeah, well, like I said; he may be a mask but at least he was a cop,” Lance shot back, “Now tell me more about this Renee person.”

“Who, me?” Dick asked as Lance settled his fiery gaze upon him once more. “Uh, what do you want to know?”

Laurel gave her father an annoyed look, “Seriously, Dad?”

He ignored her, “So why did she leave the force; the drinking?”

“Um…” Dick stumbled, looking like a deer caught in the headlights.

Bruce sighed before stepping in, “Renee didn’t leave because of her dependence issues, she left because she was outed at the station shortly after her partner was set up to take a murder rap by another cop. By the time she managed to take him down and clear her partner’s name, she was persona non grata at the precinct so she quit.”

“Huh, okay,” Lance said, filing that away. “This Renee got a last name?”

“Montoya,” Laurel said with a sigh.

“Wait, Montoya? As in Anna Montoya’s kid?” He asked, looking towards Tim. “When I mentioned Anna back in Starling you didn’t say anything about her kid being involved in all this mess.”

He shrugged, “I don’t know; I just know Renee. Montoya’s a pretty common name.”

“Actually I do believe her mother’s name was Anna but she passed away some time ago,” Bruce told him.
“Well shit, small world,” Lance said, settling back on his heels at that. He turned to Laurel, “Why didn’t you just say it was Anna’s daughter; it would have saved us all this yammerin’.”

“Maybe because I didn’t know,” Laurel muttered darkly.

“Where did you meet her anyway?” He asked her. “I mean, what are the chances of you randomly running into my old partner’s kid way the hell across the country in Gotham?”

Laurel leaned her head back and growled low in her throat before answering, “I swear to God, someday I’m putting you in a nursing home,” she mumbled then rolled her neck painfully, “Fine. The truth is that Felicity met her first then introduced us.”

He turned to Felicity, “You introduced them? And how did you meet her; through these guys?”

“Actually, no,” Felicity said reluctantly.

He frowned, “Where then?”

Felicity sighed, “I met her when she tried to pick me up in a gay bar while I was on a date with Isabel Rochev.”

Both Bruce and Oliver’s expressions darkened at that while Thea began to snicker and everyone else not already in the know froze.

“You went on a date with Isabel Rochev?” Tim repeated, his spoon dripping milk onto the counter as he gaped at her.

“Yes, but it’s not like we did anything,” Felicity said off-handedly then froze, “Well, I mean, she did get a little handsy at the end but that’s mostly because she was jealous after she caught me dancing with Renee. Plus, she was kind of tipsy.”

“Seriously?” Dig asked her with a raised eyebrow.
“It’s not like I was really planning on it being a full-on date; it was for the mission,” she said with a scowl. “The furthest I was going to let it go was maybe first base until she tried slipping right into third while I was driving her home. I think,” she said pausing again. “I keep forgetting what all the bases are for some reason. All I know is that it’s a good thing I wasn’t wearing a skirt.”

“How come this stuff only happens when I’m out of town?” Tim asked with a scowl, dropping his spoon with a clatter as Thea’s snickering turned to full-out laughter.

“I swear to God, you girls are going to make me old before my time,” Lance stared at her before scrubbing his hand through his barely-there hair, “I need a cup of coffee; it’s way too early for this shit.”

“Yeah, where is Alfred anyway?” Tim said with a frown. “More importantly, when’s breakfast because I’m starving?”

“I’m kind of getting hungry myself,” Dick said, looking towards the large commercial sized ovens. “Something smells good though.”

“You just ate a bowl of cereal,” Thea pointed out, “Both of you.”

“Cereal’s not breakfast,” Tim said dismissively, “It’s a snack you eat before breakfast, or after breakfast…or basically at any point during the day that you feel the need to consume massive amounts of sugar and Red Dye 40.”

“What he said,” Dick shrugged.

“Alfred is making a few phone calls for me but he should be done shortly,” Bruce said wryly, “Until then you can just wait like the rest of us.”

Felicity shook her head at them before heading towards the ovens, “Hey Laurel, can you and Sara set the table while I get the eggs and stuff? Also, Dig? Can you put on the coffee since you’re the only one on the team besides me who knows how to make it not taste like mud mixed with gunpowder?”

“Sure,” Dig said heading for the pot. “I’m assuming the stuff is in the cabinet above it?”
“Yup,” She told him as she peeked into the oven and then checked the timer.

“Hey! I make good coffee!” Lance objected.

“You make good coffee for a cop, not good coffee for normal people who want to just drink it and not use it as paint thinner,” Felicity shot back.


“You make that fancy shit with all the flavors and stuff mixed in,” Lance snorted. “That ain’t coffee, it’s liquid potpourri.”

“If you want, you can put on the kettle for tea then prepare the teapot,” Felicity told her. “Alfred keeps the loose leaf in the canisters on the counter and I think he has a regular Brown Betty pot with the cups; no need to get out the silver service since it’s just us.”

“Got it,” she said, pulling down the glazed ceramic teapot, “Same mix as the one you use at home?” Thea asked her.

“Should be,” Felicity nodded.

“On it,” the younger woman said, snatching the copper kettle from the stove and filling it with water from the tap.

“Where are the plates and stuff?” Laurel asked.

“In the cabinet near the sink just like in the penthouse,” she told her before reaching for one of the large copper bottom French skillets that were hanging above the island.

“Want me to set out the butter and stuff?” Sara asked from the fridge.
“Yeah, and jam; Alfred has scones in the oven so I figured I’d make some eggs to go with them,” Felicity said as she took off her jacket and laid it over one of the chairs before rolling up her sleeves.

“Need some help?” Lance asked.

“Yeah, thanks; can you put some bacon on a sheet pan and stick it in the oven?” She asked him. “There’s parchment paper on the counter you can use to line the pan.”

“Got it,” the older man said as he joined Sara at the refrigerator. “He’s got some sausages and stuff in here; want me to toss a few of those in too?”

“Why not?” She said with a shrug.

“What are you doing?” Bruce asked, following their progress warily.

“Making breakfast,” she told him as she put on some oven mitts and pulled out the scones to set them on the counter to cool. “How do you want your eggs?”

“Hey Slick, turn the oven up to 425 for me, okay?” Lance said as he began laying a rasher of thick cut bacon along with several link sausages on a large pan next to her.

“Kay,” she said, reaching over the stove to set the temperature before turning the burner under her skillet on low and adding swirl of oil to the pan. “Also you might want to look in the pantry for the oatmeal.”

Lance pulled a face at that, “We’ve already got biscuits and stuff, I don’t think we need--”

“Dad,” Laurel said in a chastising tone.

“Fine,” he said grumpily as he walked into the pantry then exited carrying a large canister of steel ground oats, “But if I have to eat this crap on my vacation then I’m also having some bacon.”

“If you want to die then that’s up to you,” Laurel told him off-handedly causing the older man to sigh
as he reached for another pot hanging off the rack and began pouring in the oats without measuring them.

“But making breakfast is Alfred’s job,” Dick said looking at all of them in trepidation.

“So?” Felicity tossed out as she walked over to the fridge to pull out the eggs and milk while Laurel and Sara continued to set things out.

“So he’s not going to be happy if he catches you guys cooking in his kitchen,” Dick said slowly as he watched them set up the breakfast table warily.

“Why not?” Sara asked him.

“Yeah, why not?” Lance asked as he put the pan in the oven then shut the door before walking over to the sink next to Thea to add some water to the pot of oats. “What’s wrong with helping the poor guy out for a change? What; are you too much of a blueblood to fix your own breakfast?”

“No, it’s not that,” Dick said flushing slightly.

“What is it then?” The older detective asked.

Tim shifted uncomfortably in his chair, “It’s just that we’re not actually allowed to touch the stove.”

“Or anything else in here that doesn’t involve sticking a slice of bread in the toaster or pouring ourselves a bowl of cereal,” Dick added. “Actually, he kind of gets antsy over us even doing that.”

“He let me make myself a sandwich once,” Tim offered helpfully.

“Once, huh?” Sara said in amusement. “And all by yourself, too.”

“Well, he sort of supervised,” he said flushing.
“Oh yeah, these are some real tough guys you got here, Wayne,” Lance said derisively as he looked to Bruce. “Too scared to even make themselves a PB&J without adult supervision.”

The other man clenched his jaw but said nothing as Dick jumped in helpfully, “To be fair, Alfred’s…well..”

“Scary,” Tim offered.

“Scary?” Lance repeated dubiously. “The polite old fella with the accent is scary?”

“Kind of,” Dick admitted. “He might not look it, but he was MI-5 and, um…” he faltered.

“And?” Lance prompted, looking unimpressed.

“Well, he once threatened to break my kneecaps just for leaving the cap off the milk and putting it back in the fridge,” he told him. “I can only imagine what he’ll do when he sees you guys cooking breakfast.”

“Dick’s right, he can get kind of scary if you piss him off,” Tim agreed before turning to the other man, “Remember what happened when he caught that bad flu and we tried helping him out by making lunch?”

Dick nodded ruefully, “I tried making him soup and grilled cheese and, well, it wasn’t pretty.”

Tim snorted in agreement, “Who knew Alfred had such a potty mouth?”

“Alfred has a potty mouth?” Felicity asked, stilling for a moment before setting down a heavy mixing bowl and cracking some eggs into it. “Since when?”

“Alfred has his moments, believe me,” Bruce said with an uncomfortable look on his face.

“What happened?” Thea asked with a grin as she moved to the stove to put on the kettle.
Dick scrubbed his hand through his hair and cocked his head in amusement, “I brought him the soup then tried giving him a bell to ring in case he needed anything else and he told me to shove it up my ass before throwing it at my head and telling me to go to hell.”

Felicity gave him an incredulous look, “Alfred did that?”

Both Tim and Dick nodded as Bruce cleared his throat, “Maybe you should just let Alfred handle breakfast?”

“Bruce, don’t be ridiculous,” she told him as she grabbed a whisk and poured some milk into the bowl as well. “Alfred won’t mind, trust me.”

Lance nodded in agreement as he put on the oats, “Besides, you’ve got the poor old guy already doin’ something, the least we can do is handle this.”

“He’s right, now how about doing me a favor and handing me the salt and pepper grinders.” Felicity looked around the room, “Scrambled okay with everybody because, if not, then tough; you should have spoken up sooner because that’s what I’m making.”

“Fine by me as long as it’s not Renee’s recipe,” Laurel told her as she began gathering juice glasses to set out on the table while Sara handled the cups.

“I hear that,” Felicity said roundly.

“Do you need me to help with anything?” Oliver asked as he moved to stand near the counter.

“Can you check to see if he has any fruit we can put out?” Felicity asked.

“Sure,” he nodded, giving Bruce a look as he did as if to say, ‘See? Unlike you and your team I’m not completely useless right now.’

“I think I saw a covered bowl in the fridge that looks like fruit salad,” Lance told him. “If not, you
can probably cut up some grapefruit or something.” He pinned Oliver with a hard eye, “I’m assuming you can use a regular knife, right? Or do you need to shoot the fruit with an arrow like William Tell in order to get the job done?”

Oliver glowered at the other man as Bruce broke out in a satisfied smirk, “I think I can manage.”

“If not, you can always get your little prep school buddy over here to help you,” he said, waving the wooden spoon he was using to stir the oatmeal toward Bruce. “Course he might be just as useless as you are unless you can find a paring knife with a little bat symbol on it.” He gave the man in question a critical once over, “I might not be that one’s biggest fan but at least he doesn’t feel the need to pretend he’s Zorro and leave little green arrows all over the damn place.” He turned to Felicity, “Seriously, what is it with rich people anyway?”

“Careful Dad,” Sara warned him as she leaned playfully on the counter, “turns out Felicity’s rich, too.”

“Maybe, but unlike these two she has some sense and doesn’t need to stand around and wait for someone else to do the work for them,” he shot back, giving Bruce another look of condemnation.

Bruce’s mouth tightened at that. He looked to Felicity, his eyes cutting towards Lance for a second before asking, “Do you need me to help with anything?”

“We’re good,” she told him as she gently shifted the eggs around the pan.

A smug grin found its way back to Oliver’s expression as he set the bowl of fruit salad on the counter, “If you want to help, Wayne, you could always find me something to serve the fruit salad in.”

He pasted on a pleasant expression as he shot Oliver a dirty look, “I’ll get some bowls out of the cabinet.”

“You do that,” the other man said with a slight smirk.

A few minutes later, Alfred hurried into the kitchen, “Forgive me for taking so long, Master Bruce, but—” He looked around in surprise. “What on earth…?”
The scene the older man walked into showed Felicity plating the eggs onto a platter while Dig was doing the same with the bacon and sausage. Lance stood at the stove doctoring the oatmeal while gruffly ordering Tim to get up off his butt and find him some raisins. The rest of their group was busy with their own tasks of setting out everyone’s drinks while Oliver and Bruce eyed each other with barely concealed hostility as they filled stemmed cut glass bowls with fruit salad.

Basically it was a cross-team coordinated attack on breakfast vigilante style.

“I didn’t do it,” Tim said quickly then winced as Thea slapped him in the back of the head.

“Wuss,” she hissed.

“That’s alright, Alfred; as you can see we managed just fine,” Bruce said, settling his eyes deliberately on Lance who snorted in response.

“Yeah, you can stick some fruit in a bowl and run around town dressed like a bat,” the older man said derisively. “Color me impressed.”

Bruce clenched his jaw at that but Felicity cut him off before he could say anything in response.

“Hope you don’t mind us helping,” Felicity said offering the older man a smile. “We just thought since you were busy you wouldn’t mind if we finished preparing breakfast.”

“Oh, not at all, Miss Felicity,” the butler said smoothly as he moved forward to examine the platters of food they’d prepared. “Thank you; that was very considerate of you.”

“Seriously?” Dick said while holding a pitcher of freshly squeezed orange juice as he stared at the older man in confusion.

Alfred turned to him, “I’m sorry?”

“It’s just that whenever any of us try to cook in here you usually go ballistic,” he complained.
“Yes, but unlike with you and Master Tim, I don’t have to worry that Miss Felicity and her companions will start an out of control grease fire,” he rebuked.

“That…!” He shifted slightly, his mouth twisted in consternation, “It was one time and we managed to put it out with the fire extinguisher.”

“Once was enough,” the butler said stiffly.

“We just wanted some cheese sticks,” Dick muttered. “I set the timer and everything.”

“Yet when the timer went off, although you and Master Tim retrieved said ‘cheese sticks’,” he bit out distastefully, “you failed to actually turn off the burner. I nearly had to call in the fire department.”

“What the hell were you thinkin’?” Lance asked the two younger men, his stern and disapproving expression a near match for the butler’s. “You left hot oil on the stove and just walked away; what’s wrong with you?”

“Hey, I was like ten when that happened,” Tim said defensively. “Dick’s the one who was supposed to remember to turn it off, not me.”

Dick rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, “I figured that when the timer dinged it would turn itself off like the microwave.”

“Are you serious?” Thea asked, looking between them incredulously. “I don’t even know how to cook and even I’m not that hopeless in the kitchen.”

“It was a long time ago,” Dick said with a sigh.

“Apparently not long enough,” Dig said with a chuckle.

“I was sixteen!” He huffed. “Not even sixteen, maybe fifteen because I had just gotten my learner’s permit and was celebrating with some junk food. I didn’t know any better, okay?”
“So you were old enough to drive a car but not old enough to figure out how the stove worked?” Sara said slowly.

“Not to mention the microwave,” Diggle added with a snicker. “Rich people crack me up, boy!”

“This explains all the microwave jokes Barbara used to make about the two of you,” Felicity said with a head shake.

“On second thought, I don’t want you dating my daughter after all,” Lance said looking at the other man like he was mentally defective. “You should stick with Anna’s daughter instead; she seems like a better bet.”

“Dad, please; knock it off already,” Laurel said in exasperation as she rolled her eyes at her father.

“Well, excuse me for someday wanting to have grandchildren who aren’t complete and utter morons,” he retorted.

“That’s a crack team of geniuses you’ve got there, huh Wayne?” Oliver said smugly causing Bruce to once again pin him with a dirty look.

“You should talk, Ollie,” Sara said with a grin of her own.

Dig chuckled, “Yeah, remember when Felicity banned him from even touching the washing machine in the Lair after it flooded and nearly shorted out her servers?”

“And that was after she put instructions on how to use it on the wall,” Sara added. “She even laminated them.”

“And had them framed,” Dig joked.

“Oh my God, is that why that’s there?” Thea laughed. “I always wondered about that; Step One: Put in clothes.” She mocked in a deep voice.
“Step Two; As you put in clothes remember to remove all sharp pointy objects, electrical devices, and grenades as you go,” Sara added with a snicker.

“You’d think the grenade thing would be a no-brainer,” Laurel added.

“It wasn’t,” Felicity said with a grimace. “To be technical about it though, it wasn’t an actual *grenade* grenade, but one of his exploding arrow heads. It was still a pretty tense moment when that thing fell out though.”

“You’re kidding,” Thea said flatly.

“Nope,” she told her. “What’s worse is that, not only did he wash it, but he put it in the dryer afterwards. Talk about a shock to the system; I’m just glad that thing didn’t go off while it was tumbling around in there.”

“Well, that would at least explain the warning about putting on a flak jacket before folding,” Laurel said dryly.

“So wait, if it didn’t explode then how did he flood the machine?” Tim asked curiously.

She grimaced, “That would be the *second* time he tried washing an exploding arrow head.”

“I still say that was Roy’s fault, not mine,” Oliver grumbled.

“It was in *your* pocket,” Felicity shot back.

“But he’s the one who put in in the wash!” He said in consternation.

Dig joined in, “Which led to my favorite part which is the note at the bottom that says, ‘Authorized Users Only—Not Oliver *or* Roy’.”
“I said I was sorry,” Oliver said tightly. “I forgot it was even in my pocket otherwise I wouldn’t have left it in there.”

“Yeah, I’m not using those machines ever again,” Thea said slowly. “I’d rather take everything to the cleaners and risk going to jail than getting blown up during the rinse cycle.”

“Exploding arrow head, huh?” Bruce smirked. “I take it all back, that was very responsible of you to want to keep your weapons springtime fresh, Queen; great thinking there. Maybe you can give me some good housekeeping tips down in the Cave later.”

Oliver glowered first at him and then at his team, “Are we ready to eat yet or what?”

“Okay, everybody grab a platter,” Lance told them.

“Nonsense, Detective,” Alfred said stepping forward to take the serving bowl of oatmeal from him. “You should all adjourn to the breakfast room while I serve.”

“That’s okay, Al, we got this,” he told the older man, “You just go in and have a seat and let somebody else do the work for a change.” Lance eyed Tim, Dick, and Bruce with a jaundiced eye, “Seems to me like these guys could stand to learn a thing or two about hard work that doesn’t involve cutesy little costumes and bat shaped toys.”

“Have I mentioned how much Detective Lance reminds me of Lucius yet?” Tim said, leaning towards Bruce with a sympathetic expression. “I mean, Tam’s dad is a lot more polite but the basic attitude is there; a kind of, ‘mess with my daughter and I will make your life a living hell’ kind of deal.”

“Actually, I think he might be worse,” Dick whispered.

“Nope, Lucius is definitely worse,” Tim said, rocking back on his heels slightly. “I mean, Lance has a gun and everything, but Tam’s dad has a way of looking at you with these cold dead eyes that makes you want to check your underwear drawer for bear traps.” He looked to Bruce, “You know, those big steel traps that could just snap your junk right off--”

“I understood the metaphor, thank you,” Bruce grumbled in irritation.
“I’m just saying, now that you’re engaged to Felicity…” Tim began.

“Got it,” Bruce said tersely.

“Let’s eat!” Lance ordered as they all made their way into the breakfast room.

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They were early, *really* early.

She glanced at the clock on the wall and sighed, noting that they still had at least another hour or so of wait time before the technicians arrived. It was a bit frustrating really. She had planned to spend that time down in the Cave but with Oliver being there, combined with Lance getting under Bruce’s skin the way he had, she thought it would be best to just get him out of there and as far away from their houseguests as she could manage.

Technically, the clinic in Wayne BioTech was shut down today along with the rest of the facility in preparation for the Gala. It was a sort of company-wide holiday of sorts since it was usually such a large distraction for anyone involved with Wayne Industries.

Actually, it was a distraction for everyone, period. Not to mention the God-awful traffic.

The Martha Wayne Children’s Foundation Gala was the Black Friday of Gotham, literally. Because the Foundation supported so many charities, it was a hot draw for celebrities, politicians, and basically anyone looking for good PR. Not that they didn’t do a lot of good, but with them came the press, the fans, and the looky-loos. Gotham (for this one weekend every year) was like Hollywood during awards season with everyone crowded outside of any and all potential celebrity hotspots in hopes of getting an autograph or snapping a picture of their favorite movie stars, while every retail shop in the city took the influx of tourists as an opportunity to get rid of last year’s inventory and give their bottom lines a boost for the upcoming first quarter.

People saved their Christmas money, year-end bonuses, and income tax checks, all in anticipation of the huge savings that came about during the city-wide celebration. Unfortunately, that sudden influx of cash along with the high profile visitors to the city also made it a target rich environment for criminals. Gotham was never more dangerous or unpredictable than it was during the second week in February which just added even more stress to an already tense situation.
Talia might be crazy but she certainly wasn’t stupid, Felicity thought ruefully. It was the perfect time to set off a stress bomb in Bruce’s head. Every year during this time, his stress levels hit the roof and that was without even having to put on the cowl. Actually, he couldn’t put on the cowl, that was half the problem right there. Before the Gala, he was the local paparazzi’s favorite target so he couldn’t risk it. Instead, he usually had Dick put on the armor and made sure to be where he wasn’t in order to throw them off.

So, between Talia, their houseguests, and everything else, Bruce was practically climbing the walls. It was one of the reasons she suggested getting married on Sunday before all this happened. She thought that maybe, if they had something to look forward to after the Gala was over, it might take some of the edge off. Instead, because they had to put off their plans, she’d inadvertently wound up adding to it.

She glanced over at his tight jaw and hooded eyes. Not that she blamed him for being in a foul mood. She wasn’t in the best state of mind either right now. Even without the threat of Talia hanging over their heads, the kicking off of the Gotham social season wasn’t exactly something she’d ever enjoyed taking part in.

Point in fact, she didn’t participate in it; never had. She’d always avoided going to these things, the Foundation Gala especially. Heck, growing up, she rarely ever stepped out of her apartment on the Friday before the Gala unless she absolutely had to...except to pay the delivery guy for her food, of course. In her opinion, you’d have to be either desperate or nuts to leave the house that weekend, no matter how good the savings were. As far as she was concerned, that’s why God invented internet shopping.

She wasn’t the only one either. Even true blue Gothamites, the ones used to the snarl of traffic and sea of bodies that clogged the city’s streets on any given day, stayed home, using their vacation days to avoid dealing with it. As such, this was generally the day when most of Wayne Enterprise’s facilities scheduled inventories or shut down any non-critical departments entirely, the in-house clinic being one of them. However, Alfred had spoken to the head of the clinic who agreed to come in along with a technician, with the promise of a large bonus as compensation for both their time and discretion.

Felicity had no clue how those poor souls were getting there, but she and Bruce cheated big time in order to avoid all that mess. He wound up driving one of his ‘civilian’ vehicles through the tunnels, popping out in the underground parking garage. Although she should probably feel bad about using the tunnels for as ignoble a reason as avoiding a traffic jam, she didn’t. Given that their only other options were to suffer through wall to wall gridlock or taking a helicopter... Frankly, it was a pick your battles moment and, while high ideals are all good and well, they both needed a break from all the stress of that morning. Bruce, in particular, needed to use that drive to decompress. There’s no
way he would have gotten that if he had to spend it breathing in fumes while hopelessly trapped in Midtown traffic. She even let him take the McLaren without complaint, even though her butt ached and she’d had to spend the entire ride with her eyes shut tight while he zipped through the tunnels to get them there and as far away from Team Arrow as he could.

She’d once asked about the tunnels years ago. Specifically she’d asked him how it was that he’d managed to build so many secret entrances and exits large enough for the tumbler without anyone finding out about it. Some of the caves were even paved with asphalt and she just couldn’t picture Alfred behind the wheel of a steamroller no matter how hard she tried.

He’d laughed at that. She remembered because it was her first real day in the Cave and he had been pointing everything out while she went through the proposed upgrades to Watchtower. The sound of him genuinely laughing while in the cowl had startled the other members of his team to the point that they all stopped and stared in amazement.

What he told her was this: While all of the Wayne buildings had secret entrances and were connected by the tunnels that ran underneath the city, he wasn’t the one who built them. Not all of them anyway. Originally those tunnels had been part of the Underground Railroad that Solomon and Joshua Wayne had established during the Civil War. The caves were part of a deep and complex network formed by both the natural springs that ran under the city, as well as remnants from old mining operations, and the abandoned subway tunnels left unfinished in the 1930’s due to the stock market crash. When Alan Wayne, Solomon’s son, began building the city that would one day become Gotham, he built the original Wayne holdings over the same secret route his father and uncle had used to transport slaves to freedom. He did it as a secret memorial to Joshua who had been killed in one of the tunnels while trying to protect one of the escaped slaves and whose body had never been recovered.

That tradition didn’t end with Alan. Since his death, the Wayne family heirs continued to build over the tunnels, adding secret entrances and exits to ensure that they would always have a way to spirit their families to safety should war ever touch their lives again. The caves weren’t common knowledge either. The Wayne family had always been a rather secretive bunch and, because they owned more than fifty percent of the Gotham skyline, it wasn’t that hard to hide them. Bruce took full advantage of that fact when he began his mission.

She looked at him noting the still stiff posture as well as the tension that radiated off of him in waves. She’d hoped the ride would relax him somewhat but he’d been completely silent the entire ride there and had remained so ever since they’d sat down in the plush waiting area of the empty clinic.

“So breakfast was fun,” Felicity said, breaking the oppressive silence as she pretended to thumb through a magazine.
“Fun. Right,” Bruce said tersely as he scrolled through the emails on his phone. “Fun in the same sense that being torn apart by cannibals then eaten alive could be considered a good time had by all.”

She shuddered. Talk about a visual, ugh. There’s dark humor and then there’s, well, *that*.

“Buck up Bruce, we still have dinner with the entire family to look forward to,” she said wryly as he cut his eyes towards her and scowled.

“I’m so glad you find this situation amusing,” he said darkly.

“What situation?”

“What situation’?” He repeated. “In case you didn’t notice, your friends from Starling City have somehow completely taken over both the manor and the penthouse leaving us absolutely nowhere to escape the steady stream of snark and hostility. Both my *private workspaces*,” he emphasized, “have been completely co-opted by others, we’re stuck dealing with this Orbital situation while we’ve got the damn Gala hanging over our heads, and now we’re having a second dinner party in as many days and I have every reason to suspect that this one will be just as big a disaster as the last one was, if not more so.”

Okay, so he might actually have a point there, she admitted silently. The being torn apart and eaten by cannibals thing was still a little overly dramatic though.

“It’s just dinner, not a firing squad.”

“I wish it was a firing squad,” he said gruffly. “Death would be a relief at this point. I’ve never been more tempted to fire Alfred than I was after he announced that he’d invited your entire family over for dinner without asking first.” Bruce looked at her, “If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear this is his way of getting revenge.”

“Revenge for what?” She asked in exasperation.

“I don’t know, but whatever I did, it couldn’t possibly warrant having to spend the evening being raked over the coals by both Lucius and Lance while Queen looks on in amusement.”
“Well, what’s done is done,” she told him. “While I would have preferred putting off having my family over as well, we can’t exactly uninvite them, now can we?”

“I suppose not,” he conceded reluctantly. “Still, it’s just one more thing I’d prefer not to have to deal with right now.”

“I know,” she said with a sigh then looked at him carefully, “Are you mad at me?”

“For what?” He asked in confusion.

“Everything,” she said with a shrug.

Bruce grimaced, “No. I’m not mad at you.”

“You sure?”

He looked at her, his eyes softening, “I’m sure. Look,” he said putting aside his phone and reaching for her hand, his thumb casting soothingly over her knuckles, “I’m sorry if I made you feel like I was angry with you but I’m not. I just…” he shook his head, “I have a lot on my mind, that’s all.”

“Want to talk about it?” She offered.

He looked at her uncertainly, “Not…not right now.”

Normally she’d let that go, but watching him brood in silence wasn’t going to work for her today. She might not be able to fix the situation with Talia or help ease the stress of the Gala, but she wasn’t going to let him throw up roadblocks over what happened during breakfast. They had enough on their plates without him pulling out the manpain on top of all that. After all, it wasn’t her fault that Lance spent the entire meal tossing barbs at Bruce, or that her dad gave him the third degree while they were in Metropolis, nor was it her fault that Peggy Ann and Tanya would, most likely, have their own opinions about their engagement. After all, she was in the same boat as he was. Her family, as much as they loved her and wanted her safe and cared for, were being just as hard on her as they were on him.
Well, maybe not *just* as hard, but they weren’t exactly being easy on her either, were they? It seemed like everyone had an opinion about their relationship but no one bothered asking her how she felt and, while Bruce was catching the brunt of it, it was her life choices they were questioning as well as his. At first, when Lance began giving Bruce a hard time, it was kind of funny. He deserved it for what he had put her through that morning...at first anyway. But then his remarks began getting even more harsh as breakfast wore on; more than one of them cutting too close to home.

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At first, everything had been fine. They had just tucked into their breakfast, everyone engaging in light conversation, when Lance spoke up.

“So, Wayne; just how old are you anyway? What; forty-five, forty-six?”

Bruce glanced up at from his plate, “Forty-one.”

The detective took a bite of his eggs then gave him a look of disapproval before going back to buttering his scone, “Can you pass me the jam, sweetheart?” He asked Thea who handed it over then nodded to her in thanks. “Forty-one, huh. What is that; a seventeen, eighteen year age gap between the two of you?”

Bruce didn’t even flinch, “Almost.”

He didn’t even bother looking up as he buttered his scone before reaching for the small jar of homemade preserves, “So basically you’re marrying a girl young enough to be your daughter?”

“Only if I got started early,” he replied evenly, sipping from his coffee cup.

“Not that early,” he shot back, finally looking across the table at him. “After all, both your boys here are older than I was when we had Laurel. I was only twenty-two when she was born and they’re, what? How old are you?” He asked Tim.

“Uh…twenty-three,” he said, obviously caught off guard by the question.
“Really? Same age as Felicity, huh.” The older man nodded, “Who’s older, you or her?”

“Me,” he said reluctantly.

“Detective…” Felicity said in warning.

Sara glared at her father and hissed, “Dad, knock it off!”

“I’m just havin’ a conversation,” he said innocently. “What’s wrong with that? Wayne doesn’t have a problem with it, do ya Wayne?”

“None whatsoever,” Bruce drawled in a seemingly casual way. He moved his plate up and propped his elbows on the table, “Feel free to ask me anything you like, Detective,” he invited with a careless gesture even though his expression was guarded.

“See?” Lance said with a pasted on grin. “If Wayne doesn’t have a problem with it then neither should you.”

Felicity glanced at Bruce who nodded, then sighed, “Fine, go right ahead and ask whatever you want to ask.”

“Okay, I will,” the older man said brightly, “Now, as I was about to say, I did a little readin’ up on you on my way here, plus I had an interesting conversation with your boy, Tim.”

Bruce glanced at the now very unhappy young man sitting next to Lance carefully. “Did you now?” He drawled lazily as he crossed his arms over his chest and pasted on his best bored rich guy expression as he leaned back in his chair.

She wasn’t fooled though; Lance’s questions were irritating the crap out of him but he wasn’t about to give either the older man or Oliver the satisfaction of seeing him loose his temper.

“Great,” Tim mumbled as he sipped his juice. “I knew it was just a matter of time before I got thrown
under the bus and yelled at.”

“Seems you’re quite the family man yourself having raised—what is it? Five—six foster kids?” Bruce nodded stiffly. Lance smiled again, ignoring the younger man beside him. “Must have been tough bein’ a single father raising that many kids even with all the money in the world.”

“To be fair, most of them were already teenagers when I got them,” he returned.

Lance’s eyebrows raised up at that, “Oof, teenagers!” He said roundly and shook his head, “That’s even worse. ‘Course, from what I could tell after workin’ with your boy here, you seemed to have done a pretty good job.” He glanced at Tim, “He’s a good kid; polite, disciplined, got a good head on his shoulders.”

“Thanks,” Tim said flatly, glaring at the older man who was continuing to dig him in deeper.

“You’re welcome,” Lance said with a crooked grin before nodding towards Dick, “I haven’t spent much time with your older one but he seems to be a pretty decent kid, too.”

“Appreciate it,” Dick said ruefully before ducking his head in an effort to keep a low profile for the rest of breakfast.

“Thank you,” Bruce said as well. “Now is there a point to this, Detective, or can I finish my breakfast in peace?”

“I’m just kind of wondering what your other kids think of you marrying a girl younger than they are?” Lance asked, his eyes sharp as he put down his fork and leaned back in his chair as well.

Felicity flinched at that one, as did Dick and Tim, but only because they all knew or suspected what it was Bruce would say next.

“They don’t think anything of it, Detective.”

“Oh? And why’s that?”
“Because two of them are dead, and the other two are MIA,” he said coldly.

Lance blanched slightly, “Oh.”

“However, if they were here, I doubt if any of them would have a problem with Felicity and I being together since our two families have always been close and share a great deal of history together. In fact, her father and his first wife were my godparents so they’ve always known of her in one context or another,” he said smoothly. “Also, for the record, Felicity isn’t younger than *all* of my children.”

“No?” He asked, rallying slightly.

“No,” Bruce confirmed. “In fact, my youngest son, Damian, would be around twelve now were he still alive.”

“You just had to go there,” Laurel muttered, giving her father a dirty look.

He cleared his throat, “Sorry,” he said contritely.

“It’s alright,” Bruce said in a slightly more subdued tone than the one he had been using. Felicity moved a little closer, placing her hand on his knee in a comforting gesture. Although he never dropped his eyes from the older man’s face, his hand automatically reached for hers under the table and squeezed. “To answer your question though; no, I don’t see Felicity as being seventeen years younger than me, nor am I having a midlife crisis. Felicity is the smartest, most emotionally centered person I know and has the maturity and poise of a woman twice her age. Those qualities, in my opinion, far and away bridge that gap and then some. As for the rest of my family and what they think about our relationship, feel free to ask. I’m sure that both Tim and Dick will tell you the same thing I told you, which is that I love Felicity and she loves me. As far as we’re concerned, and hopefully as far as they are concerned, that’s all that should matter to anyone.”

“You’re right,” Lance admitted. “Felicity is one hell of a girl.”

“I don’t disagree,” Bruce said, squeezing her hand under the table again.
“And I’m sorry for your loss, especially for your youngest passin’ like he did. Sounds like this mission of yours has cost you and your family a lot,” Lance said sympathetically.

“It has,” he agreed, eyeing the other man carefully once more.

Lance just nodded, his eyes seeking out Sara. He lifted his hand and gestured towards his youngest, “I know what it’s like to lose a child,” he said, his face darkening slightly with pain. “I lost my Sara for almost six years thinking she was dead so I can only imagine the hell you’ve been through. It ages a man, wears on the soul.” He took a deep breath then frowned, “How long have you been doin’ this anyway? What; ten years now?”

“Fourteen in the cowl but eighteen, almost nineteen years altogether,” he answered without hesitation.

Lance nodded, “What were you doin’ the other five years?”

“Training,” he said simply, “I started off doing a brief stint with Interpol at their headquarters in Lyon after I graduated law school. I stayed just long enough to learn some valuable skills and gather the intel I needed in order to track down Ra’s al Ghul and the League of Assassins. After that, I went to Nanda Parbat to train then returned to Gotham where I officially took up the cowl but I was actively building my mission the entire time.”

“You were in the League of Assassins?” He said in surprise.

“Like Sara?” Thea asked in surprise. “Cool.”

“I trained with them,” he amended. “I was never actually inducted into the League however.”

The detective nodded once as if filing that away, “What did you do with Interpol?”

“Counterintelligence,” he told him. “I was working with an anti-terrorist task force before I left to find the League. The man I trained under, Henri Ducard, had a lot of experience dealing with them as well as other extremists. As it turned out, the reason he knew so much about the League was because he was one of their independent contractors but, at the time, I didn’t know that. The whole point of me even joining Interpol was to find Ra’s. Once I’d done that, I left.” Dig looked impressed at that while Oliver merely fumed silently.
“Yeah, but Counterintelligence?” Thea repeated, “That’s what? Spies catching spies?”

“It can be,” Bruce said in mild amusement, his lips lifting slightly despite his annoyance with Lance. “In my case, it was far less exciting than that—officially anyway,” he added. “Officially, my job mostly revolved around investigating organized crime and terrorist organizations then passing that information onto other law enforcement agencies. Of course, Ducard tended to color outside the lines; he was something of a vigilante himself—or so I thought, but I disagreed with his methods. He liked to get his hands a little too bloody for my tastes,” he said, cutting his eyes towards Oliver who returned it with equal loathing. “Even so, I felt like I should be doing more which is why I left in order to pursue my mission here in Gotham.”

Lance’s eyebrows drew together slightly, “So, basically, you were a cop?”

“Briefly.”

“Still, sounds like a tough assignment balancing all that anti-terrorist stuff with a vigilante mission,” he said sympathetically. “I’ve been on the force for thirty-two years and,” he blew out a puff of breath in emphasis, “seein’ what we see, it ages you.” He grimaced. “Course, this vigilante stuff is even worse,” he said emphatically. “I’ve been teamed up with these guys for almost four years now —officially even less than that, and, boy! These last few years have been tougher than all the rest of my time on the job combined. And you,” he said, sweeping his hand towards him, “You’ve been in this mess nearly five times that. You know,” he said shaking his head again, “I gotta say, I respect the hell out of you for being able to do all of this Batman stuff yet still find the time to have a life, especially given the kinds of challenges you’ve had to face up here.”

Bruce didn’t say anything, he just watched the older man and waited for the other shoe to drop.

He looked up in feigned surprise, “Heh, I just realized,” he pointed to him, “you’ve been at this since Felicity was around five years old.”

“About that,” he agreed. “Tell you what, Detective,” he said with a hard look, “Why not just come out and say what you want to say before my eggs get cold.”

“Seventeen years is a big age gap,” he said flatly. “Still, I might be able to dismiss that given, like you said, how mature and intelligent Felicity is.”
“Thank you,” Felicity said, giving the older man a censuring look of her own. “And, because you know how intelligent and mature I am, I’m sure you also trust in the fact that I am perfectly able to make my own decisions.”

“I’m not sayin’ you can’t, sweetheart,” Lance told her. “I’m just sayin’ that there’s a lot more livin’ in seventeen years than you’d think; a hell of a lot more. After all, look at your fiancé here,” he said, his eyes brushing over Bruce, “While you were still scribblin’ in colorin’ books and learnin’ to tie your shoes, he was busy playin’ with terrorists and messin’ with the League, trainin’ up and raisin’ a bunch of kids downstairs in that cave thing Oliver was tellin’ us about. Add to that this vigilante crap and those seventeen years become a whole other lifetime.”

She narrowed her eyes at him in irritation, “Meaning?”

“Meaning that if you love this guy and he loves you, more power to you,” he said easily. “I’ll happily dance at your weddin’ and catch the bouquet. That said, before you enter into this thing, you should take into consideration what those seventeen years really mean and make sure there isn’t an imbalance of power goin’ on here.”

“An imbalance of power?” Thea burst out. “Have you met Felicity? Even if he is Batman, I’m pretty sure she could kick his ass if she put her mind to it. Well, maybe not physically,” she conceded, “He is supposed to be pretty tough, but she could definitely drain all his bank accounts and ruin his credit the first time he pissed her off!”

Lance chuckled at that, “I know Felicity can handle herself, that’s not what I’m worried about.”

“So what are you worried about?” Felicity asked as Bruce remained silent beside her, his eyes dark and hooded.

“Balance of power, like I said.” He gave her a steady look, “You see, in a marriage things have to be balanced,” he paused for a moment, allowing his words to again sink in. “It ain’t always 50/50 though; sometimes it’s 60/40, sometimes it’s 99/1; but it always equals 100% in the end and you both have to be willin’ to share the load. You have to compromise, give to get, do things you don’t want to do because you have to strike a balance. Still, that load is constantly shifting, so it’s also about managing the ups and downs and making sure one person isn’t carrying all of it, all the time. It also means not takin’ all the power, all the time; sharin’ the load can be just as hard, if not harder, some days.”

“That’s not what’s happening here,” she told him.
“I’m not sayin’ it is,” he conceded. “I just know that when my marriage failed, it was because I was spending too much time bein’ a cop and not enough time bein’ a husband. I took advantage of Dinah and dumped all of the grievin’, all the emotional stuff, on her so I could bust scumbags and thugs then spend what little time was left in the bottom of a bottle of scotch instead of by her side where I belonged. What’s worse is that when I did try bein’ with her, when she tried tellin’ me I had a problem, instead of lettin’ her take care of me like I was tryin’ to take care of her, I walled her out. I forgot that bein’ in a marriage was about sharin’ the load. I thought I had to protect her from all that, so I kept my pain to myself. I saw her sufferin’ and didn’t want to add to it so I pushed her away which only made things worse. I ignored her needs for my wants, ran all over her and disregarded her feelin’s because I was so busy bein’ in my own head that I didn’t notice that everything was crumbling all around me until it was too late.”

Both Laurel and Sara exchanged glances at that but said nothing as their father continued.

“I put everything I had into the badge,” he said regretfully. “I thought I was puttin’ all I had into my marriage too, but I was so blinded by my own grief that I couldn’t see the forest for the trees. I had a good life, a good woman by my side, and two beautiful girls; life was good…and then it wasn’t. All my grief and anger at having those hopes and dreams destroyed…I directed all of that pain inward. I thought the only person I was hurtin’ was me but, when you’re married, it’s not about you anymore.” Lance met her eyes steadily, “Like the priest said when we took our vows: One flesh, one blood; two souls made whole. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” He took a deep breath at that and clasped his hands in front of him with a thoughtful look, “When you marry someone, there is no you and them; it’s both of you all the time. I forgot that and it wound up costin’ me my family, my marriage, and damn near cost me my job and my life. Had I been doin’ this stuff, too,” he shook his head, “forget about it.” His eyes softened as he looked at her and only her, “The point is that you’ve been around these guys even longer than I have. You know what it’s like when these guys go from playin’ normal to puttin’ on their little costumes. They focus every bit of energy on whatever scumbag of the week blows into town, and damn everything else. So, if this is what you want, if you think you can handle making the kinds of sacrifices that you’ll have to make when balancing this life with marriage and kids, then I’ll trust you know what you’re doin’ and you’ll get no more guff or gripe from me. All I’m askin’ is for you to keep in mind that any marriage is an uphill battle and it takes two to tango. Just make sure you aren’t takin’ on more than you can handle.”

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After that, the rest of breakfast passed in silence but she could tell that what he said had affected Bruce deeply, especially since they had just been arguing about that very thing.

In any case, she wasn’t about to let that destroy the little bit of momentum they’d managed to build up. Ignoring his request to let it go for now, she pressed on.
“You’re still upset about the thing Lance said about the difference in our ages, huh?”

“I’m not happy about it,” he admitted tersely then looked up apologetically, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap.”

“It’s okay,” she said quietly.

“No, it’s not,” Bruce said quietly before looking pointedly at the small black bubble on the ceiling that held the security camera.

Felicity sighed, reaching for the tablet in her purse and quickly disabled the feeds. “Done,” she told him.

“All of them?” He said with a raised eyebrow, “That quickly?”

“Like I said, you might want to get someone to beef up your firewalls,” she said wryly.

“I’ll add it to the list,” Bruce said brusquely before offering her another look of contrition, “Sorry. My bad mood isn’t your fault, nor was Lance’s speech anything I wasn’t expecting to hear. You are almost half my age, after all, and I suppose I can understand how that might look to someone like him.”

“Bruce…” she began.

He squeezed her hand in his reassuringly, “No, I said he had a point, not that he was right. At first glance, seventeen years seems like a rather large age gap. I’d be lying if I said that didn’t concern me at first as well, but those years…I don’t see them when I look at you, not anymore,” he said quietly. “I don’t think of you as a child bride, nor am I having a mid-life crisis. I see you as my equal, both intellectually and emotionally. You might be younger than I am but we’re perfectly matched otherwise making that moot.”

Still, she wasn’t convinced.

Deciding to gently prod him a bit, she rolled her eyes, “Glad you can be so coolheaded about that
interrogation scene this morning, but I’m still kind of ticked off. I think my favorite part, besides the fact that it totally ruined my appetite, was when he pointed out that you could be my teen dad,” she said dryly. “My second favorite part was when he pointed out that Tim was older than me…even though it’s only by five days,” she added with a frown. “I was tempted to mention that for the sake of accuracy but decided not to at the last second.”

“I appreciate that,” he said with a slight upturn of his lips. He took her hands in his and leaned toward her until their foreheads met, “I’m not worried about the difference in our ages, that’s not what’s bothering me.”

“It’s the power thing, right?”

Bruce pulled back slightly, his expression pained, “Honestly, yes; not because I think he’s right, but because you and I had an argument about that just minutes before heading downstairs.”

Called it, she thought ruefully as she did a mental fist pump.

“I don’t think you have more power in our relationship than I do,” she denied.

“But I am a lot more experienced than you,” he said simply. “In those seventeen years I’ve traveled, I’ve trained,” he met her eyes, “My life has been on fast forward since I began all of this and…”

“And?” She prompted.

He leaned back further, releasing her hands, then rubbed his palm across his mouth before tapping his lips twice with his index and middle fingers. It was a nervous tick he had when he was feeling pensive, similar to the one Oliver had when he would pick at the archer’s callouses on his right index and ring fingers by flicking his thumb against them repeatedly.

Whenever they began with the ticks, she knew the conversation was about to take a turn for the worse. She steeled herself for what was coming next.

“Stop it,” he told her.
“Stop what?” She asked him.

Bruce sighed, “I can read you just as well as you can read me, you know. I’m not going to push you away or give you the—” then looked around once more, his voice dropping to a confidential level despite the fact that they were the only people in the waiting area, ‘‘vigilante brush-off speech’ or whatever you called it.”

“You’re sure?” She asked carefully.

He gave her an amused look before leaning forward and capturing her lips in a brief but heated kiss, “I’m sure,” he told her when they broke apart. “Mine, remember?”

“Mine back,” she said with a small smile as she cupped his cheek. She pulled back and nodded, “Okay, so talk to me,” she told him. “I may be a genius but I’m not a mind reader, Bruce; I can’t fix it if I don’t know what’s going on in your head.”

“I don’t know if you can fix it,” he said broodingly as he clasped his hands in front of him, leaning forward so his elbows rested on his knees. His eyes flicked towards hers, “Lance…he gave me a lot to think about but I need you to know that the idea of pushing you away never even occurred to me,” he said firmly. “What I was thinking about was what happened this morning when I spoke to you about the Birds, and about the fact that I wasn’t comfortable with the idea of, well, of any of it,” he admitted. “I just—I want you to know that I didn’t say any of that because I don’t think you can handle leading a team. I know you can; you can do anything you put your mind to, including running the Birds effectively.”

She tightened her lips slightly at that, “I know, you told me that already. Well, no, actually you didn’t, but you would have gotten around to it eventually.”

“You’re right, I would have,” he said, ignoring her sarcasm. “But the reason I—shit,” he cursed, shifting uneasily in his chair. “It’s just that I’ve seen…so much,” he began slowly. “I’ve seen too much and I know you have as well, but I’ve been doing this longer—”

“Bruce…” she said with a hint of irritation.

“No, Baby; just hear me out,” he asked her, his hand coming up to take hers again as he twisted his body to face her. “I’m not rehashing what I said this morning, I’m just putting it into context.” He waited for her to nod before continuing.
When she did, he took a deep breath and began to speak once more, “After a while, doing what we do, patterns begin to emerge, real and imagined. You see the same scenarios play out, time and again, and after a while you start believing in those patterns whether they’re real or not.” He began to rub circles on the back of her hand once more in a soothing gesture, “I could read you a long list of names belonging to people I’ve lost. I could write an entire book, a library of books, on the mistakes I’ve made, of what I should have done differently, of how I could have saved them. Hindsight is 20/20 and this life is so dangerous. It takes a certain amount of self-loathing to do what we do.” His eyes met hers once more, “People like us, masks, vigilantes, whatever we call ourselves; it’s not that we want to die, it’s that we don’t have anything left to lose. People who do this do it because life has taken so much from them that they’re determined not to let it take even one more thing unless it’s on their terms. I don’t want you to know what that feels like. I don’t want you to ever feel that kind of...desolation,” he admitted.

Bruce paused, his eyes taking on a deep and weighty cast, “We don’t do what we do because we’re strong, we do what we do because we’re broken.” He reached up and cupped her cheek gently. “You might feel a little bruised, Baby, but you’re not broken yet. I’m just...” he closed his eyes and swallowed, “I’m scared. I’m terrified that...that you will get broken. That I’ll be the one to break you; that this life you want to pursue will wind up destroying you and, when that happens, that I won’t be able to fix it.”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him, placing a steady hand over his heart. “I told you, most of what I do can be done from behind a monitor and, if I need to be in the field, my team has my back.”

“There are so many things wrong with that sentence, you have no idea,” he said with a small upturn of his lips even though his expression was far from amused. “The most painful losses I’ve experienced weren’t the ones I faced myself, they were the losses that came when I wasn’t there to stop them,” he told her. “They were the losses I experienced when I sent others into the field, then had to face the fact that their pain was ultimately on me: Barbara getting shot, Damian, Jason, and Stephanie dying; all of that is ultimately on me even if I wasn’t there when it happened—especially because of that because I should have been. I made mistakes that they wound up paying for and that weighs on me.” He let that sink in for a moment before continuing, “I know you’re smart, that you’re more than capable of handling yourself both on and off the field. I know you have a fire inside of you. Honestly, back when you first joined me in ‘Special Projects’, he said with wry emphasis, “if you had been anyone else, I would have let Dick take you in hand and bring you into the mission.”

“Really?” She said in surprise. “You would have let me put on a costume?”

He nodded, “Yes. After you were properly trained; yes. Like I said, you had the same spark I saw in Barbara, Dick, Tim; all of them. I knew it, they knew it, Dick especially knew it, but I never wanted that for you because you had something that they didn’t.”
“What? Lucius as a dad?”

“No, it wasn’t about your family. If it was then I wouldn’t have brought in Luke,” he assured her. “It was because I could always see that innocence inside of you. You were…pure, untouched,” he said quietly. “I don’t mean sexually, or that I thought you were too young or naive. It had nothing to do with that. I just didn’t want to diminish that aura of pure unconditional love that seemed to pour out of you. You radiated this feeling of hope; I didn’t want to be the one to corrupt that by exposing you to the ugliness and horrors the rest of us had to face out there.” He cupped her cheek again and leaned forward to brush his lips over hers, then pulled away just enough to meet her eyes again, “But even though I didn’t want to, I wound up doing that anyway. I infected you with my darkness and hurt you. I put you on this path even though I never meant to. Again, I wasn’t there when I should have been,” he said regretfully. “Queen might have brought you the rest of the way, but all of this began with my decisions, my mistakes.” He took a deep breath, “Even so, by some miracle, even after all you’ve been through, even though I contributed to dimming that light, it’s still there. I can see it and…” his brow furrowed slightly, “I don’t want you to lose that light inside of you because I need it.” His voice deepened, grew husky, “I need your hope, your goodness, because I don’t have any of my own. I lost my innocence a very long time ago and it never came back. I just—I don’t want you to have to go through what I did; not if I can prevent it.”

“You can’t protect me from everything, Bruce,” she said softly.

“I know I can’t, and I know you don’t want that, but my brain is telling me one thing and my instincts are telling me another.” He smoothed back her hair, tucking it behind her ear, before tracing her cheekbone tenderly, “The reason I’ve been able to do what I do for as long as I have is because I wasn’t afraid to lose. I’ve lost, don’t get me wrong,” he said quickly. “I’ve lost lovers, friends, family, but I was never afraid to lose any of it. It hurt, yes; it hurt like hell. I’ve cried, I’ve grieved, I’ve suffered, but with every new loss I’ve also rallied. That pain, that anger; it fueled me to win, to beat back the darkness with everything I had. I was able to do that because I never wanted anything for myself. All I ever focused on was the mission, always the mission. I convinced myself that by not wanting anything, by not needing anyone, that nothing could ever be taken from me again, not really, because it was never real before; those emotions couldn’t hurt me or slow me down because they were never allowed to take root. It’s ridiculous, I know—”

“No, I get it,” she murmured.

He nodded slightly, “I know you do.” He kissed her forehead gently then rubbed his cheek across hers, his unshaven stubble causing her to shiver as he nuzzled her ear, “I’m not…” He pulled back, his eyes dropping from hers in shame. “Another thing that got to me was when Lance asked about my kids, the ones I lost, and mentioned his own pain over Sara.”

Her heart clenched at that, “He didn’t know…”
“I know,” he assured her. “But I still heard the unspoken condemnation in his voice when he talked about the cost that comes with leading the lives we do. Your father asked me the same thing. He brought up the fact that I’ve put my children in the line of fire time and again and that he didn’t want that happening to you or to his grandchildren.”

“I know you’d never hurt us on purpose, Bruce,” she assured him.

He nodded, “I know, but I can also see where they’re coming from. From anyone else’s perspective, I come off as a monster because, yes, I did put them on this path. I made a conscious decision to recruit children into my crusade but, what they don’t see is, even though they were young, all of my protégés came into this life for the same reasons I did. All of them had experienced the same losses I had so, despite their ages, I treated them as I would have treated myself when I first decided to take on this cause. At the same time, even though I adopted them, I never thought of myself as their father, nor did they ever want that from me. I couldn’t, not and train them to do what they had to do to survive. I knew that, whether I trained them or not, they were going down the same path I did so I pushed them using the same exacting standards I set for myself. I was heartless at times, a taskmaster, even cruel, but it was their choice to stay, not mine. I thought that by keeping those walls between us, by not getting overly attached or sentimental, I was saving their lives. They knew that if I felt they couldn’t cut it, if they failed to heed my advice and became a danger to themselves and others, I would turn them away and close my doors to them forever. They accepted that. I did that with Cassandra when she decided to return to Nanda Parbat, Stephanie, even Jason. When they…” he paused, “I think the reason I was able to handle those losses as well as I did was because I convinced myself that whatever choices they made afterwards were on them, not me, even if all I was really doing was lying to myself.”

“Still, you gave them a choice,” she pointed out. “And, yes, they paid the ultimate price for those choices but that was their decision to make, not yours. This; this decision, this is my choice, too,” she said firmly.

“I know, but…” he took another breath.

“But what, Bruce?” She asked in exasperation. “I know you love me, I do, but part of that has to be allowing me to pursue something independent of us. I have to have my own space and the freedom to make my own decisions without having to argue about it constantly.”

“Like I said, I know that but you’re different, Felicity,” he told her, his eyes nearly black with grief, the kind of pain that cuts to the soul. “I know it’s not fair, it’s not right, but you are; you’re the exception to the rule in every way. You’re the only person I’ve ever let in, the one positive thing I’ve allowed myself to believe in. The only reason I was able to do all of this, this mission, lead the life that I do; the only way I was able to let everything else go, was because of you.”
“Me?” She asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

He nodded, “I don’t know why. Don’t ask me to explain it because I can’t, it makes no sense whatsoever even to me. All I know is that when you looked at me, even when you were just a little girl, all of my fear, my self-doubt; all of it left me.” He carded his fingers through his hair and gave her a bewildered look, “I don’t know why something so innocent affected me the way it did, but you looked me in the eye and told me that my job, my purpose in life, was to make sure you never had to be afraid again and I believed you. I took that very seriously because I could see that light shining out of you. For some reason it made me feel like I could do anything. I could give up on everything else as long as you looked at me like I…” he paused, his brow furrowing as he came up with the right words to say, “You looked at me like I belonged to you and you belonged to me,” he said at last. “I was your hero, the person whose job it was to slay the monsters under the bed and you, in turn, gave me back that hope and unconditional love I lost when my parents died. Through you, I could see the world through innocent eyes again. As long as you existed, as long as you were safe, I had a reason to fight, to survive. You were…everything,” he said brushing his lips across her forehead again and lingering a moment before looking down at her. “You were the thing I was fighting for long before I started wearing the armor. In fact, you were my armor,” he said at last. “You still are.”

“Oh,” she breathed.

“I look at you and I see a future,” he told her. “I see everything I told myself I couldn’t have and didn’t deserve. I look at you and see hope. I see the mother of my children, the person I want to be better for; I see the life I should have had but was taken from me the day my parent’s died. You may think that I’m the hero because I wear a mask, but I’m not. I’m not the one slaying dragons here, Felicity; you are. You’re the one saving me, not the other way around.”

It was a profound moment, the kind that never happens outside of the movies, and she was at a loss for words because no one had handed her a script.

What do you say to something like that? Thanks? Me, too?

Ditto?

Frankly, she was speechless; rendered dumb with her brains scattered into the ether.

He said the words; all of them. He said everything she’d ever wanted to hear, came full circle, and admitted every feeling he’d ever had. This day had brought her every good thing she’d ever wanted,
despite the fumbles and failures of that morning, and now she was at a loss as to what to say next.

On one hand, this was like a dream come true; Bruce, loving her, trusting her, opening his heart to her in every way. He acknowledged her skills as well as his fears. With him by her side, she had the opportunity to build a real home with a family all gathered together around the dinner table, loving and arguing, but standing strong. She had the opportunity to actually help people while working side by side with the man she loved, a man who would never again push her away or hurt her ‘for her own good’.

On the other hand…

Lots of stuff.

She finally had her own mission, one she was good at, one that made a real difference in the world, but that came at a cost and he had made it very clear that the cost of pursuing that was his peace of mind. This whole time she thought he was being arrogant and a bit selfish, but she was the selfish one here, not him. It wasn’t that he wanted to control her, it was that…

It was that he was still an eight year old kid sitting in an alley covered in blood and she was all he had left. She’d always built both Bruce and Oliver up in her head, like they were these stone gods from myth and legend. She always thought that the universe bent to their will, like they were the sun and everything revolved around them. She even envied them a bit, wishing that she had the kind of power and self-confidence that drove them to do what they do. Never once did she suspect that they needed her as much as she needed them. She’d never gotten that before. She knew he loved her, that he was afraid for her, but she never understood how much.

Now that she did know, she could see what Lance was getting at. First off, it told her that Bruce would never stop worrying about her or fighting her on this. He loved her, she already knew that, but what he was telling her now was that she held within her hands the power to destroy him and that was a heavy weight to bear. Continuing her mission, placing herself in danger; it wasn’t just her life on the line anymore, it was theirs. It meant that every decision she made from here on out would affect both of them. She knew that already, logically she knew that, she just didn’t…it just didn’t fully sink in before now.

That led to another realization Bruce probably hadn’t come to yet, one she knew Oliver definitely hadn’t; she couldn’t be Felicity or Starling. She couldn’t separate the two because, in a marriage, there were no boundaries. Like Lance said, ‘One flesh, one blood; two souls made whole. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.’
There couldn’t be Batman *or* Bruce, Felicity *or* Starling, in a marriage there would just be them.

Two people, one marriage; nothing else. Everything else revolved around that.

She still wanted to lead the Birds, still wanted to pursue her own mission, but this epiphany made a thorny situation even more complicated.

If she wanted to keep Bruce, have that life, her options here were rather limited:

She could keep the Birds, wall him out, and spend the rest of her life fighting with Bruce over this issue, but she also knew that would ultimately destroy them. It was inevitable. She’d seen what happens when cracks in a relationship were allowed to deepen and run; they became canyons filled with pain and regret. She knew that, knew what that kind of selfishness led to, because she’d already seen the results first hand. Lucius had told her the story of how his marriage had broken up a dozen times and she knew what had happened to Lance. She remembered the bitterness Laurel had once felt towards Oliver because, instead of being honest with each other about what they wanted, they stayed together and hurt each other instead.

She didn’t want that, she didn’t want to ever see a day when she hated Bruce. She didn’t want to resent him for what could have been. She didn’t want to have children who spent weekends and holidays split between them. If she married Bruce, she wanted it all. She wanted as much of the happily ever after as she could get, but she also wanted her mission. She couldn’t have both though, not on those terms. She couldn’t give 100% to the Birds and still give all she had to Bruce, too. There had to be balance and they’d never find that unless they were both willing to compromise.

That led to the question of how much were they willing to compromise? Unfortunately, Bruce wasn’t the kind of guy who was comfortable with that concept and she knew that going in so, the real question was, how much was *she* willing to concede here?

She could give up her own plans and ambitions which, well, wasn’t something she wanted to do but could if she had to. She could give up the Birds, she could. She didn’t want to but, if it was him or them, he wins. She didn’t like it, she resented the hell out of even having to think about it in those terms, but she’d also been paying attention. Again, to paraphrase Bruce; after a while you start seeing patterns emerge. She’d seen the same scenario play out for both Lucius and Lance, and both of them said the exact same thing; if they could go back in time and change things, they’d choose the people they lost, not the job. Sharing a life with someone was more important to her than having a mission. While the idea of giving that up rankled, she could get over it a lot faster than she could the alternative which was losing everything they were building toward.
It wasn’t a perfect solution though. Just giving up…it didn’t sit well with her. She didn’t react well to ultimatums and, whether he was issuing one or not, choosing between Bruce and the Birds felt like she was being asked to give up part of herself.

What she’d like to have happen, was for them to figure out a way to work together. Of course, that came with its own set of problems.

If he was willing, and if they could manage it, she wouldn’t mind letting him in, but working together meant conceding at least some of her territory. It meant that ‘separate but equal’ would have to change. It would have to be a partnership which meant merging the two teams permanently.

She thought about that.

The Birds could still have some sort of autonomy. She and Bruce could act as co-administrators while either Katana or Sara led the Birds and Dick led the Bats. Of course, that came with its own set of complications, not the least of which is that she knew for a fact that Bruce would try to run with it and overrule her whenever he got a bug up his butt. It would be a lot of work, test both of their patience, but she could live with it. The question is, could he? Would Bruce be willing to go there?

She hoped he would because the final option was…final.

Break up with Bruce.

It was the Oliver Queen method:

‘Because of the life that I lead, I just think it's better to not be with someone I could really care about.’

Only, in this case, it would be, ‘Because of the life that I want to lead, I just think it's better to not be with someone I'm in love with because I'd rather quit than bother figuring this out.’

It would hurt. It would hurt him, it would hurt her, it would hurt everyone they cared about. She knew when she got involved with Bruce that this wasn’t going to be easy and, again, Lance called it when he asked her if she was willing to put up with the kind of life that came with being married to a man who wore several masks.
She loved Bruce. Would it be easier not to? Yes. Hell, yes. He could drive her crazier than anyone with the exception of Oliver, only with Oliver the anger she felt was different. With Oliver her anger came, not just from his stubbornness, but from his willingness to destroy himself. She was constantly having to prop him up, forcing him to see reality. She loved him but it wore on her. It was hard being that person all the time, the invisible good fairy that made it all better then watched from the shadows while everyone else tried to have a life while she merely looked on. She wasn’t the girlfriend, she wasn’t the friend, she wasn’t family or wife. With Oliver, she had to be everything for him, while not taking anything for herself. It meant waiting and hoping for more but never knowing if it would ever happen.

For a long time she’d been willing to wait. She was okay with being the virgin in his virgin/whore mindset for a while, but that got old quick. Okay, being someone’s one true love who they place on a pedestal, never to be touched and merely worshipped from afar, sounds good but, in reality, it sucks. Not to slut-shame anyone, but the fact was that the ‘whores’ (who Oliver obviously didn’t respect as much as her) got all the sexy funtimes while Virgin Felicity had oodles of respect along with warm and fuzzies and a penchant for staying up late and making casseroles while watching infomercials.

In that life she’d been one cat away from becoming a crazy cat lady. Really, when she thought about it, even the crazy cat lady was happier than her because at least she had a cat to come home to. Once, when Oliver was between Lance Sisters (literally), she found herself reading a copy of Cat Fancy in the supermarket and bought it because the Scottish Fold on the cover was just so darn cute. She had been *this close* to spending five hundred dollars on a damn cat before she realized that there was no way in hell she could take care of it properly on her schedule. Even so, she spent the next three days watching cat videos on YouTube and Tumblr just to make herself feel better.

She was a failed cat lady. Talk about depressing.

With Bruce it was the opposite. Bruce *had* made her the center of his universe and that was a heady thing to someone who spent her life being invisible. But part of that, the cost of that, was this. It was the burden that came from being someone’s everything.

She loved him, she did. She loved the Birds, she loved all the possibilities that awaited her, but she wasn’t willing to pay the price for that if it meant losing him.

Maybe that made her sound like a weak-willed dishrag, but six months ago she almost died. She thought she *had* died for one brief moment of insanity. Felicity Smoak would have died in a world of mud and gore and no one would have noticed her passing. Or maybe they would, but she wouldn’t if it had been her looking in. The woman who would have died that day had done nothing with her life. She had no boyfriend, no husband, no children, no friends. She didn’t even have a cat. She did, however, have a mission. She’d saved lives, and she was proud of that, but it had been cold
comfort as she stood in the rain, soaked to the bone in so much blood that the storm couldn’t wash it away.

The only comfort she found on the battlefield that day came from a monster who told her that he was all she had, and she believed him.

That was the horror that haunted her. Had she died that day, the last person to say they loved her, the last person to say he’d missed her while they were apart, the last person to kiss her, had been Slade.

She didn’t want to live a life where the only people who mourned her passing were the monsters that haunted her nightmares.

“Do you really want me to give up the Birds?” She asked him at last.

She didn’t say it guardedly or with anger, but in a simple and straightforward way. She didn’t want to give them up, she didn’t, but she also wanted to keep Bruce. Hopefully they could figure out some kind of compromise, but only if he were willing.

“Honestly?” He nodded slightly.

“Oh.”

Okay…

Well, that didn’t go the way she wanted it to.

She took a deep breath to speak but he cut her off.

“Yes, I would love it if you weren’t part of this world, but if wishes were horses then beggars would ride,” he said, his mouth twisted into a grimace, “What’s done is done and I can’t change it. I can’t ask you to give that up even though I wish…” he paused. “Baby, I want you to be safe, but I also want you to be happy,” he said at last. “I can’t wrap you in cotton wool and lock you in a tower and expect you to be okay with that. I know if I ask you to give it up, you’ll resent me in the same way you told me that I’d wind up resenting you, so…” He exhaled roughly and rubbed his chin in
agitation, “No. No, I don’t want you to give it up, not for me.”

She felt a little bit of relief at that. Not much, but some. It was a good start at least. “What do you want then?”

“I don’t know,” he said quietly. “I can’t…this is new for me,” he said, meeting her eyes. “I don’t know how to do this.”

“Do what? Work with someone as an equal partner?” She asked teasingly, hoping to lighten the mood that had settled over them.

He gave her a rueful look, “Let’s put it this way, I didn’t get where I am by asking other people for their opinions.”

“Okay, well, here goes,” she said, biting her bottom lip as she thought for a moment about what to say. “The idea I had about keeping the teams separate isn’t going to work, not in the long term; not if we want to be together.”

“I agree,” he told her.

“I figured,” she said dryly, then paused. “The fact is that I don’t want to spend the rest of our marriage fighting with you and putting walls between us. I think that I would come to resent you more for that than I would if I had to give up the Birds altogether.”

Bruce nodded, “I don’t want that either. Believe it or not, I don’t enjoy fighting with you despite my fondness for angry revenge sex,” he said with a crooked smile. “I much prefer it when things between us are calm and we can work together.”

“I’m glad you said that, because that’s what I was hoping we could do,” she told him.

“Work together?” His eyes lit up at that and he searched her face carefully, “How do you mean?”

“I still want to try the separate but equal thing, but with a few changes.” She took a centering breath, “You wanted to retire and for us to take on administrative roles.”
“I did, yes,” he agreed.

“What if we work it like this: Dick takes on the leadership role vacated when you retire the Bat, while Tatsu takes on that role with the Birds and shares it with Sara. Meanwhile, Barbara and Mordred work together on coms,” she suggested. “She can take him on and train him. We can link Watchtower and LAIR so they can monitor Oliver’s teams as well and split the load between them with me taking the odd shift. Meanwhile, we merge the teams.”

“All of the team?” He asked carefully.

“All of them,” she confirmed. “I know you don’t like Helena being on the team, I get that, but the only other alternative is to let her loose into the world and, at least this way, we can keep an eye on her. You’re going to have to work with me on this, Bruce,” she warned him. “I’m willing to make some concessions here, but this *is* a negotiation; you have to give a little to get a little.”

He blew out a frustrated breath, “Fine, what else?”

“Oliver needs help, not just on coms,” she told him. “The Birds can bridge the gap there. We’ll have to figure it out but I think we should think about asking some of the team to relocate to Starling. I already know that I want Sara to go there, at least part time. Obviously Oliver and Tatsu have tension so I think she’d be better off here, the same with Laurel and Helena. I’ll have to ask each of them what they want to do but ultimately I’d like to relocate Mordred to Starling so he has someone handling coms on-site then rotate people back and forth. That said, Team Arrow is still his team,” she emphasized, “If he refuses help or asks us to pull back, we do. It also means giving Dick, Tatsu, and Sara a bit of autonomy. You can’t keep micromanaging everything,” she told him. “If this is going to work then there are going to be days when you’ll have to stay out of the Batcave and let them figure it out on their own.”

He made like he was going to object then paused, his lips thinning in annoyance, “Agreed.” He looked at her, “Okay, so if we give up the day to day running of the teams, then what role will we be playing here? Do you just want us to retire and underwrite the mission or what?”

“I think we should try working in the background for a while,” she said after a moment’s pause. “Neither one of us would be happy doing that forever, but I think that we should take a step back and see how it goes. Plus, even if we do take down Orbital here in Gotham, they have sites set up all over the world. We’ll have to do something about that so I think you and I should work on recruiting members to join the League; travel, network, try to work on bringing other vigilantes into the mission so we can go global as well.”
The tension around his mouth eased somewhat and he leaned back in his chair, his hand rubbing over his mouth as he considered that, “How much do you know about Orbital’s overseas operations?”

“Not enough,” she admitted. “Mordred and Tatsu probably know more than I do so we’ll have to get their input. The only thing I really know about Orbital that they might not, is that Miranda said they were governed by an inner circle she called ‘Leviathan’.”

He started at that, “Goddamn it! Fuck!”

“What?” She asked in confusion.

“When did she tell you about Leviathan?” He demanded.

“During my interview,” she said slowly. “She said she wanted me to join Leviathan, that it was Orbital’s governing body.”

“What else?”

“Nothing, just that it was basically the secret organization behind the secret organization and that there were thirteen members of the board besides her, one for every facility, and they were all Leviathan. She even gave herself the handle ‘Tiamat’ because she said that Orbital was one body with many heads all acting as one. Specifically she said that if you killed one head, two more would spring back in its place kind of like a hydra or something.”

He rubbed his hand over his forehead with a pained expression, “So that day at WayneTech when you told me they offered you a seat on the board…?”

“It was Leviathan,” she answered. “What’s Leviathan?”

“Talia’s answer to the League of Assassins,” he bit out. “When she died, we dismantled it, or thought we had. Apparently she’s trying to rebuild it.”
“Why would she tell me that?” She asked in confusion.

“It was a test,” he said grimly. He scrubbed his hands through his hair and stared upwards in silence for a moment before speaking again, “She probably told you about Leviathan to see how you’d react.” He shook his head, “On one hand, if I’d told you about Talia and Leviathan, I would have known what was going on from the beginning. On the other hand, if I had told you and you reacted to that, then she’d know for sure that we were involved and she probably would have killed you then and there. When you didn’t recognize the name it gave her reason to assume that, not only were we not involved, but that I still assumed she was dead.”

Fuck. “Basically, she played me.”

“She played both of us,” he amended.

“So what about Leviathan and the board?”

“I doubt they’re real,” he said grimly. “All the facilities once occupied by Leviathan were destroyed or taken over by either Spyral or ARGUS.” He chuckled darkly, “That explains why she chose to base herself out of a former ARGUS facility. Talia always did have a penchant for dishing out poetic justice.”

“Waller took her facilities so she took one of hers.”

“Exactly,” he agreed.

“How do you know that Leviathan is still defunct?” She asked with a frown.

“I don’t,” he admitted. “I’ll have to reach out to my contact within Spyral and find out what they know.” He paused, “Son of a bitch.”

“What?” She asked.

He closed his eyes again for a moment and made a disgruntled noise, “I just figured out something else. Wildcat and Tatsu were telling me about all these operations Orbital was targeting.”
She nodded slowly, “The human trafficking stuff?”

“Remember when I told you Talia experimented with mind control?” He asked her and she nodded, “In addition to assassinations, Leviathan dealt in human trafficking. She used drugs to control ‘slaves’ to mine for diamonds in Africa and Russia. She also used mind control on some of the people she had working for her in order to assure their obedience. Wildcat and Tatsu said that her intel was always accurate to the point that she even seemed to be able to anticipate her target’s escape routes. What do you want to bet that every single one of the operations Orbital targeted were ones originally controlled by Leviathan and that the men running those missions were her former agents?”

“So what? She was able to anticipate their moves because she pre-programmed them?” She asked with a frown.

“Exactly.”

She absorbed that for a moment, “But why target her own operations?”

“Because they weren’t hers anymore,” he said simply. “Once she ‘died’, she lost control of them. I suspect that when she saw they had flourished without her at the helm, she saw that as a betrayal and targeted them out of revenge.”

“Not to mention the fact that she got paid to do it,” she added.

“By confiscating their accounts?”

“That and accepting government contracts to take them down,” she told him.

He nodded in understanding, “Barbara said something about that as well. She said that Orbital was a security firm like Blackwater Worldwide and that they regularly bid on the same contracts.”

“I hate to say it, but that’s actually kind of brilliant,” she told him. “She’s making money coming and going, plus she’s getting her revenge while giving Waller the finger.”
“Brilliant isn’t exactly the word I’d use for it, but that’s it in a nutshell.” He pressed his fingers to his temple and winced. “I can’t believe I let all this get so out of hand. What the hell is wrong with me?”

“You can’t so that to yourself,” she objected. “You’re not omniscient, Bruce.”

“But I should be when it comes to Talia,” he said flatly. “I took my eye off the ball and…” He growled, “Fuck! It was all there and I couldn’t see it!”

“You couldn’t see the forest for the trees.”

“No, I couldn’t,” he agreed in self-recremination.

“No, I was referring to what Lance said.” She reached for him and stroked her fingers over his clenched fist until he relaxed his grip in order to clasp her hand in his, then spoke, “The reason you missed all of this happening was because one man can’t know everything. You can’t take all of it on by yourself and you can’t be everywhere at once. You need help, Bruce. You have to learn to share the load sometimes.”

“I’m trying,” he said tightly.

“I know. I know you’re trying, I know that, but you also need to stop blaming yourself for the things you can’t control,” she told him. “You can’t control everything and you have to stop trying to. I get that you think controlling the people you love is the same as protecting them, just like I know that when stuff like this happens you blame yourself because you think you lost control, or if you had more control things would be different but life doesn’t work that way. Look, you told me yourself, what’s done is done. We can’t change the past but we can learn from it.”

“You’re right,” he said nodding. “Okay, we’ll…we’ll give this a shot.”

She looked at him carefully. “You’re sure? Because, if we do this, it needs to start now. That means no more scenes like last night or this morning. You have to learn to back off a little.”

“I will,” he agreed. “After we get Talia.”
“Bruce…”

“Baby, I will gladly go on a worldwide honeymoon/recruiting mission with you after this is done, but not until I know Talia is taken out of the game,” he told her. “Until then, I can’t step back, I just can’t.”

“I get that,” she told him. “However you do need to stop trying to run me the way you run your team. You can’t order me to do what you want or bench me in order to keep me safe. We need to work together on this, got it?”

“Fine.”

“That means that you follow the plan,” she continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “Tomorrow night at the Gala, you keep your distance. You let me run my part of the op without complaint, you don’t try to bully your way into leading the Birds, and you keep the peace with Oliver. Also, you let me handle Isabel alone.” He started to object but she cut him off, “You have to trust that I can protect myself and not blow my cover by going all stupid caveman on me.”

“I wasn’t going to go ‘all stupid caveman’ on you,” he grumbled resentfully. She gave him a look and he sighed, “I just don’t like the idea of you being that close to a woman who we suspect tried to hire a hitman to kill you and who also works with Talia.”

“Not to mention Slade,” she said ruefully.

“Him, too,” Bruce said darkly.

“If you want to get to Talia then you have to let me do my part without interference,” she reasoned.

“I don’t like it,” he told her.

She gave him a sympathetic look, “I know.”

He exhaled roughly and avoided her eyes, “Fine,” he said at last.
“Good.”

He looked at her, his eyes still troubled, but the tension around his mouth easing somewhat, “So now that that’s settled, what do I get?”

She frowned in confusion, “Pardon?”

“You said this is a negotiation, that you had to give a little to get a little.”

Felicity looked at him askance, “Yeah…”

“So what do I get?” He asked her.

“What do you mean?”

“I meant that I gave in, so what do I get out of this deal?”

She tilted her head at him, her eyebrows drawing together, “Um, what do you want?”

“Can I beat the shit out of Queen after all this is over?” He asked innocently.

“Really?” She said dryly. “That’s what you want; you want to beat up Oliver?”

“Yes, I want to vent my frustrations on him without you getting pissed off at me after I beat him to a bloody pulp,” he told her.

“If that’s what you want to do, then fine,” she said with a shrug.

“Really?” He said with a slight upturn of his lips. “And you won’t complain about it afterwards?”
“Nope,” she said, popping the ‘p’.

“Not one word?”

“Not one single word,” she agreed. “Fair warning though, Oliver isn’t that big of a pushover, he can hold his own in a fight.”

“I think I can handle it,” he said confidently.

“You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?” She asked in amusement.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “I have a whole list of things that son of a bitch owes me for and I intend to get my pound of flesh for each and every one of them starting with him making a move on you while I was out of town and ending with him convincing Alfred to force that shit he drinks down my throat.”

“That’s fair,” she said, trying not to laugh. “I thought for sure you were going to ask me if we could do something kinky in bed or something.”

He paused at that, “Like what?” Bruce asked, looking at her with renewed interest.

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “To tell you the truth, it’s all pretty kinky to me. I’ve only ever been you with and Oliver and he didn’t do anything you haven’t. In fact, up until now, the kinkiest thing I’ve ever done was have sex with you in your office and the angry revenge oral thing.” Felicity wrinkled her nose at that, “Is oral considered kinky? I mean, I know it used to be kinky, like during the 50’s or something, but now it’s like normal, right? I always thought ‘kinky’ meant something outside of your usual routine.”

His eyebrows shot up at that, “Routine?”

“Not ‘routine’ as in boring, but ‘routine’ as in stuff you would normally feel comfortable doing,” she explained. She began to count them off, “I mean, I’ve done oral both ways, missionary, cowgirl, up against the wall, and doggie style—” She grinned, “By the way, I really like that one.”
“Oh you do, do you?” He purred. “And why’s that?”

“It seems to hit all the right spots,” she said musingly. “I don’t know, it just feels really good.”

He gave her a smoldering look, his lips twitching upwards of their own volition. “Feels good, hmm?”

“Very good,” she nodded. “Of course, I also like missionary because then we get to kiss and you have more maneuverability, but sometimes…”

“Sometimes, what?” He asked, shifting in his chair and leaning towards her.

She flushed and bit her bottom lip, “Well, it’s just that sometimes, um, it’s kind of nice to…I don’t know, I just—I kind of like…”

“Being taken hard from behind?” He suggested in a conversational tone.

She nodded, “Yup, pretty much. Plus we’ve only done that in the shower and I’d like to try it in other places.”

His eyes widened slightly as he grinned, “Other places?”

She groaned, “Not there!”

“There is pretty kinky,” he chuckled.

“Yeah, well, I’m not ready to go all in quite yet, okay?” She froze, “And by ‘all in’ I don’t mean all…*in*.”

He laughed, shaking his head in delight, “God, Baby…despite the, um, limitations, I think we can work with that.”
“It’s still not exactly kinky though,” she told him, her cheeks still burning hot. “You know, the first thing not the second thing. For all I know the second thing might not be kinky either but I’d like to save something for the honeymoon, you know?”

“So I get to…?” He said leadingly.

“No.”

He laughed again then stretched before looking at her, “So…”

“So,” she repeated.

“What is it that you’re curious about trying?” He asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said, cringing in embarrassment. “I guess, something relatively normal but something we haven’t done yet? I mean, I don’t want to do anything extreme like wearing rubber suits or spanking each other with wet noodles.”

“Wet noodles?” He sputtered slightly, his shoulders shaking with mirth.

“I don’t know!” She said laughing as well. “I guess I’m just cursed to be boring in bed or something.”

“You’re not boring in bed. Quite the opposite, in fact,” he assured her as he picked up her hand and kissed her knuckles with a grin.

“It’s just—there are all these books and websites out there filled with all sorts of complicated positions and accessories…”

“Accessories?” He repeated, his grin widening. “Like toys?”
“Oh, God! I hate you so much right now,” she said, covering her face with her hand and groaning. “This is so embarrassing.”

“It’s not embarrassing,” he said with a chuckle as he forced her hand down gently then met her eyes, “Baby, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Couples are supposed to talk about this stuff with each other.”

“Really?” She asked dubiously, “So you’ve had this conversation before?”

“No, because I’ve never been part of a couple before,” he told her. “Also, the women I’ve been with in the past, well…”

“Were more experienced, I know,” she finished for him with a sigh.

“More experienced doesn’t automatically mean better,” he said firmly. “In fact, the more jaded a person is about sex, the less likely they are to want to explore that sort of thing with their partner.”

She furrowed her brow at that, “Really?”

“Really,” he assured her. “They tend to get set in their ways and see sex as a means to an end. There is a huge difference between making love and screwing; trust me.”

She felt a giddy burble of something in her chest at that, “Think so?”

“I know so.” He gave her a heated look, “No matter how fast or slow, it’s never been just about feeling good for us. It’s always been more about the person we’re with.” He leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping to a husky timbre, “Not that it wasn’t good. It was very, very good.”

“Very good, huh?”

“The best.”

“Really?” She asked brightly.
He chuckled, leaning forward to capture her lips in a soft kiss, “I’ve never had a more passionate or more amazing partner than you. Why else do you think I asked you to marry me?”

“Because you love me,” she said playfully.

“That, too,” he agreed, “but it was mostly for the amazing sex.”

She slapped his arm playfully, “Seriously though, you’d be willing to…?”

“Experiment?” He shrugged, “I’m willing to do anything you want to do, anytime you want to do it,” he told her. “In fact, I’ll even call someone in Wayne Entertainment and see if they can’t get me the name of Sting’s Tantric Yoga instructor if that’s what it takes.”

Felicity rolled her eyes at him, “You’re ridiculous,” she said with a sigh. She paused for a moment, “And if I decide to stick to what we have been doing? You’re sure you won’t get bored after a while?” She asked, finally voicing a fear she’d been suppressing for a while now.

“Why would I get bored?” He asked in honest confusion. “Baby, like I said, sex is just sex; dressing it up doesn’t change that. I mean, yes, it’s fun and it feels good, but what you and I share when we’re in bed together is more than just sex, it’s intimacy, and that’s something I’ve only ever experienced with you.”

“Really?” She asked hopefully.

“Really,” he nodded. “Besides, we have the rest of our lives to explore that together. I want you to feel free to tell me anything. Trust me, I’m very interested to see what you come up with,” he said with another naughty grin.

“I’ll bet,” she said, smiling back.

The tension he’d been carrying all morning seemed to fade away as he looked at the clock on the wall then lifted his eyebrows suggestively. He tilted his head towards the inner office, “You know, there’s a perfectly good examination table in the back…?”
“Mr. Wayne?” The door to the clinic opened and three people filed in. “Hi, I’m Dr. Emile Nuska. Sorry you had to wait but traffic—”

“Not at all, that’s fine,” he said with a note of disappointment.

Felicity couldn’t help but snicker at that. “Curses, foiled again,” she whispered.

“Oh, you’re going to pay for that later,” he murmured.

“Promises, promises.”

She really hated needles she thought as she rubbed the spot on her arm that was now marked by a bruise and a Band-Aid.

Because they wanted to do a full genetic work up, they had to take several vials of blood. Much more, in fact, than they probably had to, but Bruce insisted they be as thorough as possible.

As she watched Bruce take his turn at being the phlebotomist’s voodoo doll, she started to think about how she was going to handle dinner with her family later.

Truth be told, even though it was inconvenient as hell, she was looking forward to having a real family get together. It had been a long time since she sat down at a table with everyone all at once. Of course, it also meant introducing both Mama T and Peggy Ann to her extended ‘family’ from Starling, and with that, there’d be questions.

Questions like, ‘Why are your ex-boss, his sister, his bodyguard, a police detective, and his two daughters, staying with Bruce and, by the way, when exactly did *that* happen?’

Questions with answers that, well, yeah...
Hard. To. Answer.

‘No comment’ maybe?

Oh no, no, not happening. Not with Mama T on the trail. Uh uh.

Felicity had never been comfortable with keeping secrets even though, as some would argue, she did it well. Still, Mama T and Peggy shared a special place in her heart, both women being the closest thing to mothers that she had ever known. From Peggy she got her sense of honor and tradition and from Mama T she learned the importance of helping others and of developing a strong feminist sense of sisterhood. She’d never been good at lying to Peggy but she knew how to distract her from looking too closely. Mama T though...

Tanya Fox, like Lucius, had an almost uncanny ability to sniff out the truth. She was, in her opinion, probably the strongest and most intelligent woman she had ever known. Tam took after her in that regard; both women had this unshakable sense of self that Felicity quite honestly envied. A lot of that probably came from the fact that Tanya, despite being born into a life of privilege, grew up in the sixties and seventies; a time when being a person of mixed race was especially difficult, not that it had ever been convenient.

She wasn’t naïve. She remembered seeing the way people would look at Lucius whenever they were in public together or the way ignorant people would ask Mama T or Peggy if they were her nanny. Just because her family was colorblind it didn’t mean the rest of the world was as well. As annoying as it was sometimes feeling like the only Jewish girl in a sea of gentiles, (getting funny looks when she returned their ‘Merry Christmas’s’ with ‘Happy Hanukkah’, or having to explain to strangers that Lucius was her dad, not her stepdad) it was nothing compared to what Lucius and Tanya had experienced.

Mama T, formerly Tanya King, was born in England in the late sixties. Her father, Preston King, was an American ex-pat and Civil Rights activist, and her mother, Murreil Stern, was an heiress and social justice activist, both of whom taught at the University in Sheffield.

For the most part, Tanya had lived a life of privilege. She even attended the same boarding school as Bruce’s mother, the Leysin American School in Leysin, Vaud, Switzerland near Geneva, which is where they met. Martha Kane, like Tanya, had been seen as the odd girl out. She had a reputation of being a rebel and somewhat of a flower child despite her family’s wealth, and the two women had quickly gravitated towards each other as a result.

As for Tanya, even though she was acknowledged as being highly intelligent by her teachers, and
even though she was afforded all the same luxuries as the wealthier students, she was never treated as their equal. Time and again she saw that play out when another student with lesser grades would be rewarded while she was ignored. When she asked why the other student received that particular honorific, despite the fact that she had the higher GPA, she was told that, unlike her, they could someday be able to put their education to use, whereas she could not. She was a woman and a person of color, and no matter what she did, there was no escaping that fact.

One of the stories she used to illustrate that, was when her teacher went around the room asking each of them what they wanted to be when they grew up. When he got to her she told him that she wanted to become a doctor, to which he responded, ‘You may want to set your sights a bit lower so as not to be overly disappointed when things don’t pan out the way you’d hoped. Perhaps you should seek employment in a less challenging field; you could go into nursing or possibly become a librarian instead.’

She didn’t allow his ignorance to deter her however. She said it instead fueled her desire to be more than what society said she could become based on her gender or skin color. Like Tanya, Martha also possessed a social conscience that drove her onward. She became an advocate for children’s issues, specifically child abuse as well as human trafficking. Tanya was especially dedicated to issues like gender and racial equality. Together they established the Martha Wayne Foundation which went from serving the city of Gotham to becoming a world-wide organization that provided medical care, education, and support to endangered youth as well as took on global issues like human trafficking, human rights violations, and women’s rights. On more than one occasion, Tanya had been asked by reporters if she ever intended to run for public office. Felicity had no doubt that Tanya would be a shoe-in if she ever did decide to run, but she always denied the rumors saying that the Foundation and her family needed her more.

Put simply, Tanya Fox was a force to be reckoned with, the kind of woman who could single-handedly change the world but who also possessed the kind of heart that would allow her to love the orphaned daughter of the woman her husband left her for. Quite frankly, Felicity didn’t know if she could’ve done the same in her place but she was grateful for it nonetheless. Her integrity, intelligence, and strength of will had always been a source of inspiration to her, but it also made her almost impossible to lie to. Maybe that’s why she had yet to visit her at her office, despite the fact that she’d been back from the Women’s Conference in Israel for a few days now.

Well, thanks to Alfred, that avoidance streak she was on would end today. She also suspected that her father, despite promising to keep her engagement to Bruce a secret, had spilled the beans. Like her, he never seemed to be able to master the art of lying to Mama T.

Oh yeah, this was going to be a rough day for all of them.

“Do you want to grab lunch before I drop you off at the Foundation Building?” He asked her after the technician left with their tray of samples in hand.
Mind reader much? She thought.

Wait a minute…

She turned to look at him slowly, “Drop me off?”

“I just thought you might want to spend some time catching up with Tanya before your appointment at the salon,” he said off-handedly.

“Right,” she nodded, not buying that one for a minute. “You just don’t want to face the firing squad.”

He looked at her with an innocent expression in place, “Excuse me?”

“Come off it,” she said flatly. “You’re trying to avoid Tanya which is why you want to just drop me off.”

“Not true,” he denied. “I merely wanted to give you two time to catch up. Plus, we’re not supposed to be seen together, remember?”

“By who? Who’s going to see us? The building’s shut down until after the Gala,” she retorted.

“There are still people in the building,” he shot back. “Security people, decorators, caterers, people closing up shop…”

“Liar,” she scoffed. “I know you too well for you to try that crap on me, Bruce. Let me guess; you arranged to have Alfred rent out that entire salon just to make up for the fact that you were going to turn tail and run, didn’t you?”

“Wrong again,” he said firmly, even though she knew for a fact that he was full of shit. “I had him make those arrangements because I knew you and your friends would enjoy it and that, once the building is closed to the public, it will be completely secure. Also, if I was trying to avoid Tanya,
then why would Alfred have invited them over for dinner tonight?"

“Because he’s punishing you for being a complete and utter coward, that’s why,” she said easily.

Bruce met her eyes then sighed, “Fine, I was trying to avoid Tanya.”

“I knew it,” she said with a hint of triumph. “You do know that if we get married--”

“When we get married,” he corrected her.

“When we get married,” she repeated, “Tanya is going to kind of be your stepmother-in-law once removed, you know that right? You can’t avoid her forever.”

“That’s not a thing,” he told her.

“What?”

“There’s no such thing as a stepmother-in-law once removed.”

“Well, she is,” she shrugged. “Even if she isn’t though, she’s still your godmother which makes her even closer related to you than me.”

His eyes shifted at that before his shoulders sagged in defeat, “I wasn’t trying to avoid her forever,” he told her. “I was just trying to avoid being surrounded by her, Lucius, Peggy Ann who apparently hates me, and now Detective Lance--who apparently hates me even more than she does--while Queen looks on in sadistic glee! That wasn’t cowardice, it was self-preservation.”

“You’re saying that you’re scared of my family,” she said slowly. “My sweet, kind, lovable family, several of whom have received humanitarian awards for working with *orphans*?”

“No, I’m saying that I know better than to wander into a trap unarmed and surrounded,” he shot back. “You do too which is why you don’t want to go alone. Instead you want me there to act as your human shield.”
“Human shield?” She repeated dubiously.

“I’m many things; stupid is not one of them.”

She pursed her lips at that, “So, because of all that, you just decided to throw me to the wolves by myself instead?”

“Pretty much,” he admitted.

“You’re an ass,” she said flatly.

“You asked for honesty,” he shrugged.

“Fine, you’re honestly an ass, happy?”

“Thrilled,” he drawled in return. “I’m still not going in there until I absolutely have to.”

“Jerk,” she muttered.

At that moment, Dr. Nuska came back in with a clipboard, “Alrighty then,” he said as he sat down on a rolling chair in front of them and scanned through their paperwork, “So we’re going to run your samples and, hopefully, we should have all the results within the next few days. Until then I just need to go over some of the answers you gave on the questionnaire. Miss Fox,” he said, glancing up at her, “You left your medical history rather incomplete.”

“I know,” she said with a grimace. “Unfortunately I couldn’t fill out the part about my biological father’s side of the family because I don’t have that information, sorry.”

“That’s actually one of the main reasons we wanted the genetic profile done in the first place,” Bruce told him.
He nodded, “It’s not that uncommon for someone to have these types of screenings done for that reason. You asked us to be thorough and, given that Miss Fox is Jewish, we’ll also be checking for mutations in the HEXA gene that could cause autosomal recessive genetic disorders like Tay-Sachs as you said you were interested in having children, correct?”

“Yes,” Bruce told him.

“Is there a reason that you might think I could be affected by something like that?” She asked him. “I thought that mainly affected Ashkenazi Jews, plus Bruce’s family is Scottish; wouldn’t we both have to be carriers?”

“Although it does predominantly run in Ashkenazi Jewish families, it can affect other ethnic groups as well,” he told her. “Plus you mentioned that you think your mother’s family was originally from Russia or Germany, correct?”

She flushed, “Yeah, unfortunately I don’t know a lot about that side either. I know that ‘Smoak’ is German, that’s my mother’s maiden name, but that my maternal grandmother’s family was Russian. That’s about all I know though. Oh, and there’s a possibility I might have some French in there, too, but we don’t know for sure.”

He nodded, “Even though your mother might not have identified as being Ashkenazi, there is a good possibility that she was or had some relatives who were. Most members of that ethnic group settled in Eastern Europe and Germany so it’s worth checking out. Also you mentioned your mother had Albinism.” He waited for her to nod, “Albinism is also an autosomal recessive disease so that may be an indication of a genetic mutation that may have been passed down to you. In addition we’ll check for indicators in both of you that might lead to Medium-chain acyl-CoA dehydrogenase deficiency, cystic fibrosis, Niemann-Pick disease, spinal muscular atrophy, Roberts syndrome; basically anything that both of you could be carriers for that may affect any children you might have. Also, because you don’t have a complete medical history, we’ll also look for autosomal dominant mutations such as Huntington’s disease, neurofibromatosis type 1 and 2, Marfan syndrome, hereditary nonpolyposis colorectal cancer, hereditary multiple exostoses, Tuberous sclerosis, Von Willebrand disease, and acute intermittent porphyria. Basically we’ll go through the entire alphabet,” he said with a smile, “However, just because we’re looking for them, it doesn’t mean we’ll find anything. And, even if we find a mutation somewhere, or that both of you turn out to be carriers, it doesn’t mean you can’t have healthy children or that you, yourself, will develop a disorder down the line, okay? We’re just collecting data and, after we do that, then we’ll start crunching numbers and talking risk factors. No panicking!”

“Okay,” she said taking a centering breath as Bruce ran a comforting hand down her spine.

The doctor looked at her chart again, “I also noticed you didn’t put down the date of your last
menstrual cycle.”

She flushed again, “That’s because I can’t remember.” At Bruce’s frown, she sighed, “Look, I realize that there’s probably an app for that and that I’m the only woman in the world who doesn’t have her bodily functions completely mapped out, but the truth is that I’ve never been regular when it comes to that and, until recently, I haven’t been on any kind of birth control in order to keep it regulated.”

Dr. Nuska frowned, “Do you have a rough estimate of when your last cycle ended? One month? Two?”

“Three maybe? Maybe more?” She said reluctantly, ignoring the way Bruce was undoubtedly glaring at her right now. “I’ve, um, been under a lot of stress for a while now and stuff like sleep and regular meals weren’t exactly high on my to do list before I returned home. I know it’s not a good excuse, but I’ve been told that it may have contributed to that.”

“It can, yes,” he said with a concerned look. “Have you had a physical recently?”

“No. Actually, um…yeah, no. I haven’t actually been to a doctor other than the gynecologist in four years?” She said cringing.

“Four years,” Bruce repeated with a glare.

“Not *officially* anyway,” she said under her breath.

“If your stress levels are as high as you say, you may want to schedule something soon,” he told her.

“She will,” Bruce said firmly even as she rolled her eyes at him.

He looked at the chart again, “It says here that you’re on Depo-Provera; when did you begin using that?”

“A couple of weeks ago.”
“And before that were you sexually active?”

“Yes,” she admitted with a sigh. “And, before you ask, no we didn’t use a condom but I took Plan B right afterwards and then went to the doctor for the shot. They gave me a pregnancy test and it was negative.”

He nodded and made a note on the chart before putting it aside and looking at both of them, “Okay, what did your doctor tell you about the Depo shot?”

“Well, she said that sometimes it could prevent you from getting your period,” she said with a grimace.

“Is that something you wanted to happen?” He asked curiously. “Do you have particularly painful periods or PMS?”

“No, I just thought it would be more convenient,” she admitted.

“Have you been using condoms as back up since beginning Depo Provera?”

“No.”

“Are you saying Felicity could be pregnant despite taking birth control?” Bruce broke in.

“It’s unlikely but we’ll have you do a quick urine test and run a blood panel just to be sure,” he told them. “We can run that with the samples we’ve already taken so need to put any more holes in you today, okay?”

“But I already had a pregnancy test that was negative,” Felicity reminded him.

“Urine tests aren’t as accurate as blood screenings,” the doctor said evenly. “They test for human chorionic gonadotropin which might not show up until two weeks after implantation occurs, and since it can take up to fourteen days for the sperm to fertilize the egg, that means you have to be at
least four to six weeks pregnant before most quick tests will register enough hCG to deliver an accurate result.”

“But I took Plan B the very next day,” she insisted.

“Plan B is meant to be used as back up only, not as a primary form of birth control,” he said gently. “It’s effectiveness is between 75-80% which is far less than other forms of birth control like the pill or condoms.”

“Oh,” she said with a sinking feeling. “I did not know that,” she said slowly. “Alright-y then, feeling pretty stupid right now…” She hazarded a glance at Bruce who was staring at the doctor in mild shock. “Yeah.”

“Okay,” Dr. Nuska turned in his chair and reached into the bottom of his desk, pulling out a sample cup and handing it to her. “Before we go any further, let’s get a sample and see what it says. No panicking, remember? That’s Doc Nuska’s number one rule. My assistant even keeps threatening to take up needlepoint just so we can put it on the wall and frame it.”

“Gotcha. Good plan…because panicking…is…bad,” she said, hesitating for a second before taking the sample from him and getting up from the chair. “Where…?”

“Down the hall and to the left,” he told her. “Leave the sample in the window when you’re done.”

“Great,” she breathed as she walked out the door without looking at Bruce. “I just love peeing in a cup. Yeah me.”

A few minutes later, after convincing her bladder to cooperate while trying not to pee all over her hand, she returned to the exam room. The doctor had apparently left because Bruce was sitting there alone, his shoulder’s tense and his expression fairly unreadable even for her. If she had to hazard a guess, it was a cross between freaked out and pissed off.

“Oops,” she said with a smile.

“Oops?” He repeated, staring at her in disbelief.
“What do you want me to say? Sorry?” She asked him. “You’re the one who kept trying to knock me up, remember?”

“Do you think you could be pregnant?” He asked grimly.

“I doubt it, but I don’t know,” she said bluntly. “If I am though then it’s entirely your fault.”

“My fault?” He asked, obviously taken aback.

“You’re the one who cursed us by trying to play mind games with Oliver,” Felicity told him. “Now, if I am pregnant, depending on what the ultrasound says, you could be stuck with him for life.”

His head rocked back at that, “You’re saying it could be Queen’s?”

Now it was her turn to flinch, “No. I mean, yes, if I was pregnant then, depending on how far along I am, yes, but I’m not pregnant.”

“But you could be,” he said looking at her.

Her brow furrowed at that, “If I was, would that be a problem?”

“If it was Queen’s baby?” He asked her.

“Yes,” she said, steeling herself for his answer.

He paused, “No.”

“You don’t seem very sure,” Felicity said carefully.

“Only because, if you are pregnant, then I intend to be this child’s father no matter who supplied the DNA,” he said firmly.
She took a centering breath, “Bruce, I can’t and won’t keep Oliver from knowing his child, you should know that.”

His eyebrows drew together at that and he rubbed his chin before tapping his lips with his fingers, “Even if it did happen the first time we were together in Starling, chances are it’s still my baby. You were with me two days before you were with Queen and you’ve been with me exclusively since then.”

“It’s not a majority rules kind of deal,” she said in exasperation.

“I know that,” he said with a grimace. “I do have a degree in biology, remember?”

“I remember,” she said easily, “but what I think you’re saying, and correct me if I’m wrong, is that even if the timing is right, you want to pretend that it couldn’t possibly be his, meaning you don’t want a paternity test when the time comes.”

“No, I don’t,” he admitted.

“And I told you that I wouldn’t do something like that to Oliver.”

“He doesn’t want a child, I do.”

“Oliver would want to be part of his child’s life,” she said with a hint of anger.

“He has a child already that he has nothing to do with,” he reminded her.

“And I told you that he didn’t have a choice in that!”

His jaw tightened at that, “Baby, if I had a child, I would do any and everything to keep him with me no matter what and so would you. Obviously Queen didn’t want to take on that kind of responsibility.”
“Bruce, you weren’t there, you don’t know what happened or what he went through; I do,” she said stubbornly. “Merlyn kidnapped Connor. He threatened to take him away as a replacement for Thea and Tommy, then later, he threatened to kill him in revenge. We *barely* got him back and, in the process, Oliver nearly wound up getting killed. We’re just lucky that everyone was able to walk away with nothing more than a few cracked ribs and a couple of stitches.”

“He signed away his parental rights,” he reminded her.

“Waller refused to take Connor and his mother into witness relocation unless Oliver agreed to those terms,” she shot back. “She wanted to screw with him but she also had him over a barrel because, technically, those *were* the rules. Unless he signed away his rights to his son, ARGUS would be on the hook for interfering with his custodial rights if he ever changed his mind. She was protecting her own ass basically but, personally, I think there was more to it than that.” At his curious look, she sighed, “All I know is that she made some remark about children.”

His eyes sharpened at that, “What remark?”

“I don’t know, something about how it wasn’t the first time Oliver had been in this position because of a child and that the last time they were making deals, he reneged, so she wasn’t willing to take any risks when it came to him and his ‘inconvenient’ paternal instincts.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know, Oliver wouldn’t say,” she admitted. “I do know that, when she said it, he got very dangerous and I thought for sure he was going to snap her neck, but he just signed the papers instead.” She blew out a frustrated breath, “The point is that this isn’t your decision, Bruce; it’s mine, and I won’t be a party to that kind of deceit.”

“First of all, it is partially my decision,” he objected. “That could be my child just as much as it could be his. In fact, chances are it is mine given that you most likely became pregnant *after* we left Starling.”

“If I’m pregnant at all which I’m probably not,” she reminded him. “Not pregnant.”

“True,” he conceded, “But if you were then it’s also a matter of what’s best for the child.”
“How is covering up the truth, and stealing a child away from one of its parents, best for anyone?” She asked him.

“You said yourself that the reason Queen doesn’t see his son, even though Merlyn is dead, is because he’s afraid for his safety.”

“So?”

“So how would this child be any different?” He asked her. Without waiting for her to answer that, he added, “If Queen is really so afraid for his son’s safety that he would sever all ties to him, then he’ll be just as reluctant to take on being a father to this child. If not, if he does want to establish paternity, then he’ll only be doing so in order to form a permanent link to you, not to the child. If I’m wrong and he genuinely does want to parent this child, then by doing so he’s saying Connor’s life is more valuable to him than your child’s. Either way, he doesn’t need or deserve to be this child’s father, I do.”

“So you’re arguing a catch 22?” She sputtered in disbelief. “He’s damned if he doesn’t want him or her and damned if he does?”

“It is what it is,” he said blithely.

Biting back an angry comment, she said, “I’m not pregnant, Bruce.”

“We don’t know that,” he said quietly.

“I’m not,” she said resolutely. “And if I am…” She closed her eyes, “If it were you, if your child were being threatened, wouldn’t you do anything you could to protect them?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. “I would move heaven and earth for my child. There is nothing I wouldn’t do, no obstacle I wouldn’t overcome, no act too desperate or monstrous, *except* that one! I would *never* abandon my son. I didn’t do that with Damian despite the fact that he was what he was, which is why, if you are pregnant, I should be the one to take on this responsibility, not Queen.”

She let out a noise of frustration, “I’m not even going to bother with repeating the fact that I’m not pregnant!”
“But you could be!” He insisted.

“Okay, I’m done!” She said throwing her hands up, “Dr. Nuska’s ‘No Panicking’ rule is in effect along with the ‘Don’t Screw with Felicity’ rule! I’m not discussing this with you anymore until after the doctor comes back with the results.”

“Fine!” He growled.

“Good!”

“Good!” He repeated.

She tossed him another filthy look then sat in silence as the ticking of the clock seemed to echo throughout the room.

Luckily, they didn’t have to wait long.

“Is she pregnant?” Bruce asked before the doctor had barely entered the room.

“Not according to the strip test,” he told them.

Felicity huffed a sigh of relief, “Good! See? I told you I wasn’t pregnant.”

Bruce glowered at her but said nothing.

“Chances are you’re in the clear,” the doctor assured them.

“Chances?” Bruce said.
“Well, there is still a possibility you could have gotten pregnant *after* the Depo shot,” he told them. “It’s unlikely but, as I said, the quick test can only detect HCG if enough is present in the woman’s bloodstream.”

“So, if Felicity is pregnant, then she can’t be more than a couple of weeks,” he supplied, his expression lightening up considerably.

Meaning that there was no way Oliver could be the father, she supplied mentally as she resisted the urge to smack him in the back of the head.

“Correct,” he agreed.

“So what now? I take urine tests for the next two weeks?” She asked wryly.

“No,” the doctor said with an amused chuckle. “Like I said, I highly doubt you’re pregnant but, just in case, we’ll run the blood panel and that should confirm it. The test we’re planning to run on your sample is sensitive enough to detect pregnancy as soon as six to eight days after fertilization.”

“And when will we get those results?” Bruce asked him.

“Probably within the next three to five days, the same as the rest of your results,” he told him. “As requested, we’re putting a rush on everything so we should have something for you by next Friday at the latest.”

“Thank you,” he said, standing up to shake the doctor’s hand. “Are we done here, or…?”

“We’re done,” he assured them. “And, don’t worry, we’ll keep this in-house and we’ve labeled the samples with a number instead of your names just in case.”

Bruce nodded and placed his hand on the center of her back as she stood then led her out of the room. To her credit, she resisted saying anything until they were in the elevator despite the fact that she was tempted to knock him on his arrogant ass.

The second the door closed though…
“I am so angry with you right now.”

“I got that,” he said as he casually rocked back on his heels without looking at her.

She cut her eyes towards him, “You’re an asshole, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told,” he sighed as he watched the numbers could down to the lower levels.

“I can’t believe you,” she said shaking her head in disbelief. “I just—I can *not* believe you.”

“What’s not to believe?” He asked her.

“You wanted me to lie to Oliver about whether or not he could be our child’s father,” she reminded him.

“So?”

“So?” She repeated incredulously.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” he told her.

“How do you figure?” She asked tightly.

“The point is moot,” he reasoned. “If you are pregnant then, according to the doctor, he can’t be the father.”

“But if he *were* the father—!”

“But he’s not,” he said cutting her off. “I’m the father, not him.”
“I’m not pregnant!” She growled.

He nodded slowly as the doors opened then led her out of the elevator, “But if you *were* pregnant then I would be the father.”

He unlocked the McLaren and she opened the door angrily before sliding in with a wince as her butt hit the rock hard seat. “That’s not the point!” She said crossly as she struggled to get the seatbelt on.

He leaned over to help her with the straps, “Then what is the point?”

She stopped struggling with it as Bruce snapped them into place across her lap and chest, “The point is that you expected me to agree to that plan in the first place!”

“No.” he told her, sitting back in his own seat and strapping in before pressing START.

“No?” She asked in surprise.

“No,” he said as he pulled out of the parking spot and moved deeper into the structure instead of towards the exit. “I *wanted* you to agree with me but I knew you wouldn’t.”

She stared at him in disbelief, “What?”

He drove the car to the same utility locker they had emerged from earlier. It was a concrete enclosed space with a bright orange rolling door with the words ‘Maintenance—Authorized Personnel Only’ spray painted in bold block print across the front. He touched a button on the sun visor and the door rolled up revealing what appeared to be several old and out of commission gas powered and electric floor machines.

As she watched, the floor sank and a ramp slid out of the gap, covering the broken and dilapidated heavy duty scrubbers. In a matter of seconds, the ramp was fully extended to the point that Bruce could drive down the sharp incline of the maintenance shed, and into the tunnel’s entrance that was lit by several small reflective beacons.
Normally she would have been fascinated by the whole James Bond-ness of it all, but right now she was way too pissed to do anything besides shoot the man sitting beside her the filthiest glare she could muster.

As soon as they cleared the ramp and were well into the tunnel, he glanced at her and sighed, “I knew, chances were, that you would want to tell Queen right away whether we knew for sure that he was the father or not. I also knew that, if you didn’t tell him right away, you’d spend the next several days tearing yourself up over it only to go through this big emotional scene with him where you blurted out everything all at once. You’d be overwrought, he’d do his posturing, I’d do mine, you’d be the only one suffering in the meantime, and then, sooner rather than later, Queen would pull a runner and leave you in the lurch.”

“You don’t know that!” She said with a scowl.

He threw her a longsuffering look, “Baby, people follow certain patterns of behavior and running is Queen’s MO. Whether he thought this was his baby or not, he’d spend a few days talking a good game then, the minute he found out that there was a real possibility it could be his, he’d bolt. I’d then spend the next several weeks or months trying my best to convince you I wanted this, while you waffled between feeling guilty for sleeping with Queen in the first place and convincing yourself that that you were somehow taking advantage of me. Meanwhile, we’d have to wait long enough for the doctor to do an unnecessary and invasive procedure like an amniocentesis so that you could establish paternity for your own peace of mind even though I really don’t care either way. Then,” he took a sudden sharp turn that had her clutching her seatbelt even though his voice never faltered or rose beyond a comfortable conversation level, “I’d again be forced to convince you I wanted this. By that time, the pregnancy would be well underway and the last thing either of us want is to cause a media spectacle if the tabloids ever got wind of it or to create any more friction with your family.”

“So you thought that arguing with me would solve all that?” She asked in confusion.

“Yes,” he said easily. “I knew I wouldn’t win the argument, but if I argued hard enough, made it clear that I wanted this baby no matter what its biology, by the time Queen did head for the hills you’d know that I meant what I said; that I want this child.”

“You—!” She made a garbled noise of frustration, “What—what would you have done if it had been Oliver’s baby and he still wanted to be part of its life?”

“That wouldn’t have happened,” he said dryly. “But, on the off chance I was wrong, then we’d figure it out. Either way I would have firmly established that I have no intentions of giving up on you or this relationship.”
“You’re unbelievable, you know that?” She spat at him.

Bruce looked at her calmly, “I don’t see why you’re so upset about this; Queen isn’t the father, I am. Doctor Nuska even said so.”

“I’m not pregnant,” she reminded him something dangerously close to her Loud Voice.

“Yet,” he agreed. “Next week though you might be and, if you are, it’s definitely mine.” He glanced at her, “What do you want for lunch?”

Felicity just stared at him in amazement, “What?”

“Lunch,” he reminded her. “I’ve already had two meals that have been completely ruined and I’m looking forward to an equally disastrous dinner. I figured that we should at least try for one decent meal today, don’t you?”

She shook her head at him, her mouth falling open slightly.

He looked at her again and grimaced, “Fine, just to make it up to you I’ll even take you to that burger place you like so much.”

She rubbed her eyes wearily then clasped them in front of her as if praying for the patience to not just haul off and slap the ever living shit out of him…which wasn’t that far off from the truth.

“Take me to the Foundation,” she said carefully.

“You want to have lunch there?” He asked with a thoughtful frown. “I suppose we could have security send up the delivery people but I was hoping to limit access to the building as much as possible.”

“I don’t want to talk to you,” she said in dangerously low tones. “Just take me to the Foundation.”

“Fine,” he said, making another sharp turn.
A surprisingly short time later, they were pulling up into the alternate Batcave. As soon as the McLaren came to a stop, Mordred was out of his chair and rushing towards them.

“Cool!” He said, taking in the vehicle as they both exited. “What is this thing; a Lamborghini?”

“It’s a McLaren,” Bruce said with a scowl. “What are you doing down here?”

“Felicity texted this morning and asked me to look through the building’s mainframe,” he told him. “I also went through Watchtower looking for invasive code but you’re clean.”

Bruce glowered at her for a moment before turning back to Mordred, “Where’s Luke?”

“He left,” the other man said with a shrug. “He said he was going home to get some sleep or something.”

Bruce threw her another dirty look then sighed, “Fine. Did Felicity also tell you that I need to get inside the Orbital facility today?”

The younger man nodded, “I’ve already spliced together some looped and randomized footage to fool the computers in case anyone’s watching, that way we don’t get caught out by a glitching bird or a passing homeless guy, and Tatsu already requested Booster and Ted for the afternoon shift.”

He nodded at that, “How quickly can you get us in?”

“Well, the plan is for me, Tatsu, and J’onn--” he paused, “That’s so weird. I know he’s really J’onn, but I keep wanting to call him ‘Alice’,” he said grimacing slightly. “Maybe it’s because we technically dated for a while, you know? Not that I have a problem with dating another dude,” he said quickly. “I mean, I consider myself to be the kind of guy who sees personhood before gender even though I’ve only really gone for women so far, but still.” He looked at Bruce, “I’m not into labels. I’m more of a cosmic consciousness kind of guy. Which, you know, since it turns out that I not only dated a dude but kissed an alien, is pretty--”

“Mordred,” Felicity said sharply.
Damn, she didn’t sound like that when she went on a tangent, did she?

“Oh, um, right,” he said clearing his throat. “Anyway, the three of us will go in to run the security updates. While J’onn—” he pulled a slight face at that, “I wonder if he’d be cool if I still called him Allie? Allie was such a cute name.” He caught the annoyed expressions on both their faces and cringed, “Oh, yeah, um, J’onn is going to be keeping the security system busy and loop in the feeds while I install the back door into the system.”

“What back door?” She asked as Bruce looked at him as well.

“Oh, uh,” he hitched his thumb towards Watchtower, “I spent most of the morning hanging out with Barbara over Watchtower—she’s really cool, by the way,” he said with a grin. “She really digs my tats.”

“Barbara really is cool,” Felicity conceded with a slight upturn of her lips despite the fact that she was still ticked off at Bruce. “So what did you guys come up with?”

“Orbital jacked their coding from ARGUS,” he said smugly. “Unfortunately for them, they hired me to beef up the system. Barbara and I came up with a backdoor Trojan I can slip past them based on your LAIR decryption algorithms.”

“Will it work?” Bruce asked him.

“Yes, but I can only risk shutting down for ‘updates’ for an hour, tops. Any more than that and we’ll catch heat,” he warned them. “Also, it’s going to take a while to set up so it will be one hour from the start of my scans, no more.”

“We’ll have to make it quick then,” Bruce said with a grimace. “Tell me about this ‘Dave’ you work with. Is he going to be a problem?”

“Dave?” Mordred scoffed, “The guy’s a prick who can’t hack for shit. All he does is brown nose and give me static because, in his opinion, ‘I don’t project a professional image’.” His mouth curled in derision, “I hate that guy. We’re fucking vigilantes, not insurance salesmen!”
“Felicity mentioned that he seemed to be in Talia’s pocket.”

“Her *back* pocket,” Mordred agreed.

He ignored that, “She also mentioned some security footage that turned up the night she dropped a friend off at the airport. Does he possess the skills necessary to hack into the airport CCTV system?”

“With an Orbital console to break it down for him Barney style?” He said, pausing to think about it. “Sure, but he’s not smart enough to sweep up afterwards. I can check out his workstation if you want, make sure.”

“Do that,” he told him. “Also I need all his incoming and outgoing communications monitored—all of them; work, home, even Facebook. Leave no stone unturned. If you hear or find any chatter on Miranda, Orbital, Talia, or Leviathan, I want to know about it.” He glanced at his watch, “You said you could get us in this afternoon?” Mordred nodded, “Okay, I need you to call Queen, Tim, and Dick and then have them meet me here to discuss strategy over lunch.”

“We’re having lunch?” Mordred asked, perking up at that. “Great because I’m starving down here.” He glanced over to the workstation, “You should seriously consider putting in a mini-fridge and a microwave. Plus, you know, a coffee pot would be nice.”

“No,” Felicity said firmly.

“No coffeepot?” Mordred asked forlornly.

“No, not you,” she told him in exasperation. “You,” she said pointing at Bruce. “No.”

“What do you mean?” Bruce asked, turning to her in confusion.

“I mean you need to go back to the manor,” she told him. “Take Mordred with you through the tunnels and do your planning there.”

“You want to go home already?” He frowned, “I thought you wanted to visit with Tanya before we
“Leave?”

“*I* am,” she said flatly. “*You* are leaving.”

“Baby…” he sighed.

“Don’t ‘Baby’ me right now, Bruce,” she warned him. “I am this close to doing very bad things to your credit rating, I swear to God.”

Bruce glanced at Mordred who shifted uneasily as he cleared his throat and looked between them, “Um, I’m just going to go over…” he pointed his finger towards the workstation and clucked his tongue before spinning on his heels and leaving them in peace.

“I understand that you’re upset, but you need to let this go,” he told her quietly when Mordred was a safe distance from them.

“Let this go?” She repeated incredulously. “You tried to manipulate me—again! After we talked all morning about how you weren’t going to do that anymore!”

“When did I try to manipulate you?”

“Are you kidding me?” She burst out.

“I did not try to manipulate you!” He insisted.

“Bull fucking shit!”

Mordred hopped up from his chair and rushed towards the elevator, “I’m just going to go…” He pointed toward the roof of the tunnel and hit the down button. Repeatedly.

Felicity’s lips tightened, “What the hell do you call that shit you tried to pull then, huh?”
“It wasn’t manipulation,” he said calmly. “Manipulation implies that I was trying to get you to do something against your will. I had no intention of forcing your hand; instead, I merely anticipated your reactions and planned accordingly.”

“‘That’s the textbook definition of manipulation!’” She yelled. “‘Pick up a fucking dictionary, turn to ‘M’, and there it is!’”

“Where was the manipulation in anything I said?” He demanded. “Answer me that?”

Felicity heard the lift door open and Mordred frantically scrambling inside, but ignored it. She was too damn mad to worry about making a scene at this point.

She leveled an accusing finger at him, “You protocoled me!”

“I ‘protocoled’ you?” He repeated with an arched eyebrow.

“Yes!”

He tilted his head in mild amusement, “That’s not even a word. At least not in the way you’re using it.”

“Oh yes it fucking is!” She raged. “Protocoled; verb. To have Batman fuck with your head, you asshole!”

At that, Felicity turned on her heel and marched towards the elevators.

“Baby, you need to calm down…” he said, following after her.

“No! I am not a protocol, do you hear me? Do not get on this elevator, Bruce,” she warned him. “Go back to the manor, stay there, and leave me the hell alone. Don’t try calling me, don’t text, and don’t you dare pop upstairs for a snack! Go. Home.”

“What about Orbital?” He asked in frustration.
“Mordred will keep me up to date,” she snapped as she hit the down key angrily. “You can hold a conference over the phone or something; I don’t care! But I have had it! I’m done!”

His eyebrows drew down in concern, “Meaning?”

“Meaning that I don’t even want to look at you until I calm down and that might take a while.” She got on the elevator and hit the button for the penthouse. “Go home!”

“Baby--” He stepped forward just as the doors shut in his face leaving Felicity to seethe in silence alone.

Chapter End Notes

Eilowyn and I got into a debate as to who was the better Bat fan casting; Richard Armitage or Matt Bomer. (Matt Bomer, *rolls eyes*.) TeaWithLemon insists it's Christian Bale or nothing...eh, okay. I mean, technically, he played Batman but I never liked him. Mostly it was because he didn't look like Batman. I like Armitage because he's close, even if he's not a perfect match, but he does have the darkness to play him. We found lots of possibilities though.

Antonio Cupo
http://www.pinterest.com/pin/396387204678155856/

Clive Owen (eh)
http://media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/76/15/02/7615022ed7b1f5e742f760ea1fecd6da.jpg

Uriel Del Toro even though he doesn't look like him but is shirtless
http://media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/63/cc/37/63cc37e2e1112af44cf277e075305f9b.jpg

Thomas Beaudoin
http://media-cache-ec0.pinimg.com/236x/72/ce/b8/72ceb863b8488b5f5284e80f1ec94f4c.jpg
David Gandy (pardon me while my panties slide off onto the floor)

http://media-cache-ec0.pinimg.com/236x/3d/91/e0/3d91e07d2e93e1f19d14776a79ee756c.jpg

The possibilities are endless. Feel free to vote for these or submit your own Bruce. Tell us why or why not, tell us how they encompass the brooding of the Bat, and be as descriptive as you like.

Also feel free to tell Eilowyn that Matt Bomer is too pretty to be Batman. I could definitely see him as the perfect fit for Daniel Garret though because he's close but no cookie and he's pretty which would bug the shit out of Oliver and Bruce.

As for my pick of Richard Armitage, check these out and tell me what you think:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_Dt_6tf70Y
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIPumY9oqgA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIBa76oapWw
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCltyExzIhw
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pf-rXfxEw2w
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQT7NYHdW_E
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrB7tD7fDI8
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALaDbEG-SCI

Plus he can do a really good American accent:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnsJzfjMveA

I don't have anything for Matt Bomer, Eilowyn can dig something up for that one. I'm not helping her cause! ;p And notice there is no Batfleck here. I'll believe that shit when I see it but Daredevil gives me doubts.

Thanks and happy fancasting!

---Jen
Chapter Sixty

I want you to know that I wanted to write a chapter three times longer than this. I had planned on having the pre-gala moments with Mama T and the girls followed by dinner and sexy funtimes, but Felicity really needed some girl bonding. After I zoomed past the 100 page mark, I realized that now was the time to split the chapter. Eilowyn says I'm the George RR Martin of fanfic, and I know I can be, but y'all have waited too long to have to wait another week on me so here it is. No sex, just a lot of laughter and information that might come in handy later.

Sorry I didn't deliver the greatest love scene ever written but that'll have to wait for next chapter. For now, let's give it up for hanging with the girls and having some sisterhood, Birds of Prey style! No stupid boys in this one!

---Jen

The Birds of Prey
Chapter Sixty

As the elevator drew upwards towards the penthouse, Felicity felt an all too familiar emotion clutching at the pit of her stomach. If she had to describe it, it was this sick, dirty feeling grinding in her gut that felt like sandpaper against an open wound. It was a physical pain fueled by an emotional one; a mix of anger, confusion, and guilt.

Yes; guilt. Even though she had no reason whatsoever to feel guilty, she assured herself. Bruce was being an ass—again. He went way too far—again. And if anyone should be feeling guilty here, it’s him.

Only, according to him, Bruce didn’t do guilt; that was Felicity’s job apparently.

“Shithead,” she muttered under her breath.

The door opened to the study and she stepped out reluctantly, her emotions drawing her in two different directions simultaneously. Part of her, a larger part than she cared to admit, wanted to go back down to the cave, like some sad, pathetic thing, and apologize for losing her temper like that. “Which is frankly ridiculous,” she said huffily. “*He’s* the one in the wrong here, not me!”

Why should she apologize when he’s the one who spent the entire day attempting to manipulate her, first with the crap that morning about how she wasn’t qualified to run the Birds, then with the thing at the doctor’s office even though he knew Oliver’s mother hid his son from him for years? And what about her feelings on the subject? He knew she was sensitive about that stuff! The whole reason they were doing genetic testing in the first place is because she had no idea of who she was, or where she came from, and yet he wanted her to agree to keep her child from knowing his or her biological father? For God’s sake, he even sent out feelers to eliminate Ducard as her biological father, so he knew exactly how sore a subject that was for her!

“Oh wait,” she said out loud, “That’s right; it was just a big joke, right Bruce? Just a ploy to minimize the emotional fallout later on? Well, I’ve got news for you,” she growled, “even *if* Oliver pulled a runner, it was still way the hell over the line, you—you—asshole!” She looked over towards the hidden cameras on the off-chance he’d turned them back on (which, knowing him, he probably had) and gestured toward it angrily, “Yes, you! You’re a complete and utter asshole, you know that? And I mean *asshole*—the bad kind—not the one you seem to think is meant to be a term of affection, because I am *so* not feeling affectionate right now!”
She wasn’t stupid or naive; she knew better than anyone that Oliver could face down an army without blinking but when it came to dealing with his feelings? Yeah, to say that he was somewhat unreliable when it came to facing an emotional crisis was an understatement. Oliver ran, it’s what he did. He ran when Tommy died, he ran from his responsibilities to his family’s company when Moira was in prison, he never even showed up to her funeral after Slade killed her, he ran from being a father to Conner, and he ran from his feelings for her, but none of that mattered! While she would like to think he’d want to be part of their (imaginary—as in DOES NOT EXIST) child’s life, even if he ran at least the truth would still be out in the open; no secrets, and no lies. She may have to lie and hide the truth about a lot of things in order to protect the ones she loved, but the burden of carrying that particular secret would not be hers to bear, not if she had any say in it! If he ran then that would be his choice, a choice he made for himself, not one made by someone else for him. For better or for worse, the least she could do as a mother is make sure that her child would never have to struggle with their identity the way she’d been forced to.

…even though she wasn’t actually pregnant nor was she planning on being pregnant anytime soon, but still.

“Yeah, buddy, you’ll be lucky if I even let you close to my cookie jar ever again after what you pulled this morning,” she said turning to the camera once again.

The kicker was that Bruce didn’t even do it out of jealousy either. It’s not like he was afraid that she’d up and leave him for Oliver if he was the father. No; in fact, he was absolutely confident in the fact that she would ultimately choose him and that they would be raising that child together, no matter what. All he was trying to do, according to him, was avoid drawing things out because he’s a busy guy who didn’t have time to deal with her emotional nonsense.

“Emotional nonsense,” Felicity spat out. “Overwrought?” She huffed as she paced back and forth in agitation before glaring at the hidden camera in the clock face, “That was the word you used, right? Overwrought?” She asked with more than a hint of bitterness. “You manipulated my emotions in order to ‘spare me’ from ‘mentally torturing myself’ later. Yeah, like you pissing me off here and now is so much better!”

But no, as usual Bruce just conveniently dismissed everything she had told him, everything she’d experienced, because he knew better, right? Because, like Tim said, Bruce was relentless and he would keep pushing, and pushing, until he finally got his way.

“Well, not this time,” she promised. “And then—and then!” She pointed another accusing finger at the clock, “You had the *gall* to just, you know, act like it was no big deal! No apology; just that smug, self-satisfied, ‘I’m the father, not Queen, so it doesn’t matter anymore’, before offering to buy me a *burger*!” Felicity said as she got good and wound up. “Well, let me tell you what, Mr. High and Mighty ‘I’m Batman and I Know Everything blah blah blah’; it matters and you can’t buy your way out of that with a goddamn hamburger, no matter how good it is! It could be the goddamn epitome of cheeseburger-dom on an edible gold bun with edible diamond sesame seeds on top and you’d still be fucked in the head for what you tried to pull on me!” She glared at the clock face, her voice dropping to an icy registry, “And don’t you even think about bringing up the fact that I’m not pregnant because it’s still the principle of the thing, you—you--*jerk*!”

And what’s worse, he didn’t even think he’d done anything wrong! In fact, he made her feel like she was the one who was out of line and that was bullshit! Okay, yeah, she lost her temper, yes, and yes she walked away and told him to not even speak to her, but she was perfectly justified in doing that!

“He probably thinks this is all funny, right now, you know that?” She walked up to the statuette of the Maltese Falcon and glowered as her fingers began to absentlly trip over the bronzed feathers,
“He’s probably watching this and laughing his ass off because he thinks making me look like a crazy person who talks to themselves is amusing. And you know what’s worse? He called me ‘Baby’ in that tone afterwards, you know?” She told the statuette. “Not in that sexy, sweet, melty Bruce way, but in that smugly patronizing *Batman* way. Like, ‘Baby, just be a good little girl and let me handle everything because I’m the Bat and I know what’s best for you’. Shithead,” Felicity muttered darkly. “I mean, he just *frustrates* me so much. One minute he’s pouring his heart out and being so great, really seeming to make an effort, then the next thing you know, out comes his inner Bathole.”

She glared at the clock face again, “You’re just--!” She made an angry noise and stomped her feet, her hands balled into fists at her side, “You’re the one turning me into a crazy person, you know that?! I am not this person, Bruce! I will not let you turn me into the kind of person who—!” she paused, her brain searching for the right words, “Okay, yeah, so I always talk to myself, but still, you’re not—you—just shut up!”

She turned back to the statuette, “I mean why…?” She shook her head, tilting her head back in aggravation, “It would be *so nice* to have just one day—just *one* day—where I could relax and enjoy a nice, normal relationship with him, you know? Not all the time, not every day, mind you, but just a day without drama and vigilante relationship angst. No Batman, no world-ending crisis; just us minus the intimacy and control issues that come along with the cape and cowl. Maybe go on a picnic or a walk in the park, maybe head to the movies for some stale buttered popcorn and overpriced gummy bears. Just go somewhere where I didn’t have to deal with manpain or vigilantes who devolve into spoiled little boys when they don’t get their way. But no,” she said, her mouth turning down in a scowl, “No, I can’t have that because I’m in a relationship with stupid Batman and his stupid boy penis—ugh!” She growled in frustration, her fingers still gently stroking over the bird’s face, tracing its beak and eyes then wandering down its breast in a calming meditation. “I should’ve just listened to Sara and just tried being a lesbian instead.”

“Yes!” She turned to see Sara grinning at her from the doorway as she did a fist pump. “Talk about great timing on my part, huh?

“Fantastic timing,” Felicity agreed wryly, the anger slowly draining out of her at the sight of her friend.

“I thought so,” the other woman said with a smirk. “So does this mean you’re finally going to give up on stupid boy penises so that I can *finally* rock your world, or what?”

“I’ll think about it. What are you doing here anyway?” Felicity asked in confusion, her own troubles temporarily forgotten. “I’d have thought you and Laurel would want to stick close to your dad today?”

“Yeah,” she said ruefully as she entered the room, “I love my dad, don’t get me wrong, but only in small doses.”

Felicity raised her eyebrow at that, “So you bailed and dumped him on Laurel instead?”

She shook her head, “Laurel’s in the living room watching the show with the rest of the girls. Meanwhile, dad is at Bruce’s place bonding with Alfred and torturing pretty much everyone else. They’ve got this whole bromance developing, it’s actually kind of adorable,” she said with a crooked smile, “It started with Dad pwning Ollie and Bruce and, by the time we were leaving, they were exchanging recipes and coming up with some kind of Thai/French/Italian fusion thing in between zingers. Dinner should be interesting.” She entered the room further and nodded at the statuette, “So is this a private conversation or will any Bird do?”

“Conversation?” She asked, avoiding her gaze.
“You know; manpain and stupid boy penises,” she said with a smirk. “Because, between you and me, he doesn’t exactly strike me as the talkative type and, also, Mordred told us how you guys got into it downstairs. You actually had him worried about Bruce’s safety which, when you think of it, is pretty impressive seeing as he is Batman and all.”

“First off, I’ve decided that the bird is a girl because reasons,” Felicity said smartly. “Secondly, thanks for the offer, but I’d rather not talk about it,” she said as her hand stilled over the falcon’s artfully crossed wings, then sighed, “Not right now, anyway. And third…” she sighed, “I’d really like to avoid the ‘B’ word for the rest of the day, if possible, thanks.”

“Which one?” She asked with an amused purse of her lips, “Bruce or Batman?”

“Both.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” she said, taking another deep breath and blowing it out slowly as she gave the statuette one last pat before straightening so she could look the other woman in the eye. “I’m just so sick of every single conversation any of us ever have these days being about the men in our lives and all the stupid crap they pull even though we’re the ones who put up with it. I just want to hang out with the Birds and forget all about men in masks for a while, you know? No pressure, no talk about stupid boy penises, or even the mission—I want to just be with my girls and leave the rest of that bullshit where it belongs which is *not here*. *This*,” she said gesturing around her, “is officially an angst-free zone, starting now.”

“Preaching to the choir,” Sara grinned. She reached out and touched the statuette as well, “Is this the real…?”

“Yup.”

“Awesome,” she said, her smile broadening. “You know, dad loves this stuff,” she touched the bent tail feather from where it had been dropped on the set during the filming of the original movie. “Every time that movie would come on cable, he’d watch it with us and say he should have been born seventy years sooner.” Her features softened into a fond expression, “I think that’s what got Laurel started on becoming a lawyer, too. We’d spend whole weekends watching old black and white movies like The Thin Man and crime drama’s like Anatomy of a Murder and those hilarious Margaret Rutherford Miss Marple movies from the sixties.”

“I *loved* those movies,” Felicity said, her mood lifting as her lips curled into a grin despite the lingering heaviness from her earlier confrontation with Bruce pulling at her. “Oh, and Tony Randall as Poirot in The Alphabet Murders?” She sighed, “He’s my second favorite Poirot after Albert Finney in Murder on the Orient Express.”

“What about David Suchet?” The other woman chuckled, “Or did you make me watch all those DVR’d episodes for nothing?”

“I like him, too, but he’s no Albert Finney,” she said, wrinkling her nose slightly.

“True,” Sara agreed as she shot her another amused look. “I swear, I think that sometimes you and dad share a brain, seriously. I’ve said it before, but you should have been his third kid; you both have this weird love/hate thing with mysteries. Growing up, the only thing we ever saw him read other than case files were old detective novels by guys like Dashiell Hammett and Mickey Spillane. I think he always saw himself as a modern day mix of Sam Spade and Mike Hammer; all fast talk and hardboiled attitude, you know?” Her fingers began to trip over the statuette just as Felicity’s had
done and her eyes lit up as she turned to her, a mischievous expression on her face, “We have got to invite him over here to see this thing; he’ll totally flip his lid. He might even try to take it home with him.”

“I seriously doubt your dad would do that,” she laughed.

“You obviously don’t know how much he loves Bogey then. Mom said that when they first moved in together the only two things he brought with him from his old apartment were his dart board and his framed poster of Bogart in The Maltese Falcon. No matter what she did she could never get him to give them up. He wanted to hang it over the mantle in the family room instead of their wedding portrait but she wouldn’t let him. I think half the reason he didn’t mind spending so much time at your place was because of that Errol Flynn poster you have hanging up on your wall; if you had a dart board, too, he probably would’ve moved in with us. You two are birds of a feather, seriously,” she said wryly as she examined the bronze more closely then glanced up at her, “Hey, I just realized, we have an actual Bird of Prey in the Bird’s Nest!” She paused, “Well, we have a famous statue of a Bird of Prey in the Bird’s Nest, but you’ve got to admit, that’s still pretty damn cool.”

Felicity’s eyebrows lifted slightly at that, “Huh, never thought of it like that but, yeah, I guess it is.”

“If you and Bruce ever break up and he kicks us out, we are totally stealing this thing,” Sara said in a deadpan. “He can just go buy another one or something.”

“Why not?” She said off-handedly, playing along. “I mean, sure, he paid millions of dollars for it but he can afford it. Besides, they made like four of them.”

“Exactly. Also, we should name her ‘Samantha’. You know, after Sam Spade.”

“Oh yeah; definitely. And she can be our official Birds of Prey mascot. We can even get ‘Samantha, the Maltese Falcon’ stitched on our softball jerseys,” she agreed with a perfectly straight face.

“Damn right, and we are totally going to kick all those other vigilante teams’ asses. Oh, and we should start a basketball team, too, that way that Big Barda chick could be our ringer,” Sara smirked then hitched her head towards the door. “Now c’mon before we miss the rest of the show.”

“What show? There isn’t even a TV out there,” she asked wrinkling her nose in confusion as they headed out together. “Which, when you think about it, is kind of weird,” she added. “I mean, all the bedrooms have them but not the main sitting area or the kitchen. We should totally talk to Zander about that then do a movie night after all this Orbital crap is settled.”

“It’s not a TV show,” Sara told her.

“What is it then?”

“You’ll see.”

“Just tell me,” Felicity demanded impatiently as she followed her out.

“It’s a surprise,” Sara said with a naughty grin.

She gave her companion a dubious look, “Yeah, I no longer trust your surprises, not after last night anyway. I want you to know I didn’t even get a bite of turducken, thank you very much.”

“Patience is a virtue,” the other woman said with a snicker.

An evil snicker.
“Just tell me,” she whined. “Is it bad? Is Isabel tied up on the pool table while you guys take turns bouncing the eight ball off her face?”

Sara halted suddenly to gaze thoughtfully up at the ceiling, “No, but that’s a good idea. In fact, first chance I get, I am so doing that.” She shook her head then sighed before continuing on, “It’s nothing bad, trust me. Like I said, it’s just a show,” the other woman told her as she nodded towards the seating area.

Felicity followed her gaze and the first thing she noticed was that most of the Birds were present and seated on one of the couches staring at Creote in rapt fascination as he tidied up.

The other thing she noticed was Creote. All of him.

“A gun show,” Sara said slowly with a smirk.

“Wow.”

If Felicity were to describe the scene before her, she’d have to start with the 6’8” wall of pure muscle that was dressed in a ruffled apron he got from God knows where, bearing the words ‘Bless This Mess’, a skin tight black muscle shirt, and red and black lycra bicycle shorts that were pulled taut over his…

His…

She tilted her head to the side to get a better look.

“That’s…” Felicity said faintly. “Wow.”

Yeah, if something like that came at her with intent, she’d probably be lobbing some rocks, too. Hell,
if that’s what he was packing in his down time…

Despite her propensity for innuendo, Felicity did not consider herself to be a particularly dirty-minded person. That said…

Damn. Just damn.

She must have said it out loud because Sara murmured, “We’ve even been naming it.”

“What?” She asked in confusion.

The other woman nodded, “So far your sister is winning with ‘The Russian Roto-Rooter’, because if that doesn’t clear the pipes, nothing will.” Sara looked back at him with a frown, “Actually, after taking that on you’d probably have to replace the plumbing altogether.”

“Ouch,” she winced just thinking about it.

“Ready to go grab a seat and objectify your house guest with the rest of us?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Felicity said. “I meant, ‘sitting on the couch was a good idea’, not the objectifying part.” She paused, “And also assuming by ‘grab a seat’ you meant the couch, otherwise that probably wouldn’t be good at all.”

“Although, that’s a thought,” Sara said faintly as she reached for her, pulling her towards the others as the Russian picked up a duster and began to wander around the room. “A very, very intriguing thought…” Her mouth fell open slightly as he flexed his massive bicep. “Is it a little hot in here or is it just me?”

“It is getting a bit warm-ish…” Felicity said dumbly, eyes firmly fixed on the large--really, really *large*--man, her mind filling with all sorts of interesting yet mildly disturbing images as she stumbled after her friend.

Soon they were settled amongst the others whose eyes were also locked on the man in front of them in rapt fascination. Tam and Thea were seated to her right, while Sara, Lyla, and Gypsy occupied the other half of the couch, a bowl of popcorn being passed between them. Helena and Laurel were seated on the floor in front of Lyla, occasionally snatching up a handful of popcorn while Renee passed the time by playing on her tablet with a mildly bored expression on her face over on the chaise.

“What were you asking earlier?” Sara whispered as they watched Creote do this sort of half shimmy to whatever was playing over his earphones as he sprayed some furniture polish onto a dust cloth.

Felicity glanced at her, “Huh? Oh, um, why…why is he dressed like—” Creote dropped the cloth and bent over to pick it up causing all the women to crane their necks in order to follow his movements, “—that?”

“Tam,” Sara said in a hush. “She bought him clothes.”

“You sister is a freaking genius, by the way,” Thea told her faintly.

“Thank you,” Tam said without ever taking her eyes off Creote’s incredibly fit form. “You wouldn’t believe how long it took me to find clothes in his size. Not that they’re actually his size,” she admitted.

“Yeah,” Helena said leaning forward. “They’re a bit…”
“Tight,” Laurel finished for her with emphasis on the hard ‘T’ in ‘tight’ so that it erupted from her lips with a crisp yet somehow lascivious sound as in ‘tigh-TAH’.

Actually, ‘tight’ was an understatement, she thought to herself. Those shorts were clinging so close to his skin she swore she could see every vein and muscle, so much so that she was surprised that parts of him weren’t turning purple.

Felicity winced slightly. Yeah, again with the uncomfortable and highly inappropriate mental images.

“Bike shorts,” Lyla hummed, obviously more comfortable with her filthy thoughts than Felicity was with her own. “I’m with Thea; that’s just freaking genius.

Laurel tilted her head slightly and squinted, “Is he wearing, um…?”

“No!” Lyla snorted, “I mean look at him,” she said gesturing towards him with a sweep of her hand. “Hell, I can tell the man’s religion from here, can’t you?”

“Looks like a good Jewish boy to me,” Sara agreed.

Felicity adjusted her vision upwards as there were some mysteries that she really, really didn’t feel comfortable solving at the moment.

“Wow,” Thea breathed, making a fist with her small hand and then looking from it to his lower torso pointedly. “Look at that thing! That’s…that’s got to be a record or something, right? I mean, seriously.”

“I always did want to break a world’s record,” Sara said with a smirk.

“You’d be breaking something but I don’t think it would be a record,” Helena tossed back.

“Oh my God,” she cringed. ‘Why me?’ she thought. All she wanted to do was hang out with the girls and forget about men for a while and, instead, she wound up getting treated to the male version of a Russian French maid bopping his ass to techno in the middle of the living room while wearing pants so tight you could see his circumcision scar.

Allegedly, she added mentally. She wasn’t going to look to make sure. There were some things she did *not* need to see. No way, uh uh.

She was not going to look, keep it above the waistline!

Not…going…to…

…look.

Her eyes drifted downward of their own volition.

“I’ll be damned,” she muttered to herself, her eyebrows shooting towards her hairline as she took it all in. All of it.


“That can’t be comfortable,” she said with a slight head shake. “You’d think that would…chafe what with all the, um…” she made a helpless gesture, “rubbing.”

Helena snorted at that but, surprisingly, didn’t say anything.
“You know how they say size doesn’t matter?” Thea mused looking towards her. “That matters. That’s some pretty significant ‘mattering’ right there.”

“That shit looks like an elephant holding an apple in its trunk,” Lyla agreed.

“Think about it,” Laurel said in quiet reverence. “Really think about it.”

“Think about what?” Gypsy muttered.

“It’s a little cold in here, he’s in shorts, and that’s still…” Laurel blinked slowly, “Like that.”

“I don’t get it,” the younger woman said in confusion.

Lyla handed her the bowl, “Shrinkage, more importantly, the lack of it.”

“What’s that?” Gypsy asked, her brow wrinkling in confusion.

“Virgin,” Helena said with a sneer.

“I’m not a virgin!”

“Okay then, how many of those,” Huntress nodded towards the man as he said something in Russian to the large dog trailing behind him curiously, “have you seen?”

“I don’t think anybody’s ever seen one of those,” Thea snorted. “Seriously, if they had then don’t you think they would have written an article about it in the paper like they do when somebody catches a record sized fish or something? Talk about Moby Dick, I mean, look at that thing!” She said gesturing towards him. “That’s front page above the fold kind of big right there, boy!”

“They probably did, only by the time they finished reeling him in, they wound up having to print it in the obituary section instead,” Lyla said dryly.

“So?” Helena prompted the younger girl, “How many of the regular sized ‘those’ have you seen, Little Miss ‘Not a Virgin’?”

Gypsy flushed, “By those, if you mean…*those*, um, one. Almost.”

Everyone turned towards her.

“Almost?” Thea asked in amusement.

“It was dark,” she said defensively.

Laurel’s eyebrows rose in surprise, “So, wait, Mordred is your first then?”

“Not…quite,” she said reluctantly before scowling, “Can we just, you know--” she gestured towards the large Russian who was now murmuring something as he patted the dog on the head causing his tail to thump on the floor in excitement.

There was a click from beside her and Felicity turned to see Tam holding out her cell as she snapped a picture of Creote, “Please tell me you aren’t Instagramming this. You do know these guys are wanted by practically everybody, right?”

“Yeah,” Tam said sarcastically as she began to tap on her phone. “I’m not stupid you know, I’m just sending it to Zander.” Less than a couple of seconds later her phone beeped, “He said he’ll be here in less than five minutes.”
Three and a half minutes later…

“We’re going to need more popcorn,” Zander said wide-eyed as he settled in and automatically reached for the bowl that was handed to him. “I skipped lunch and I plan on being here awhile.”

“How did you get here this fast anyway?” Renee asked with a grin.

“I was downstairs running my ass off between the art gallery and Carousel trying to get two weeks’ worth of stuff done in time for the Gala tomorrow,” he answered without taking his eyes off the other man. “They’re not shutting the rest of the building down until after five, and then we still have to wait until it clears before we can get the lobby done, so we’re probably going to be here half the night just putting up decorations, and that doesn’t include the awning outside or the red carpet line. Those we have to work on tomorrow because the cops have to block off the street for us first. Oh, *and*, lucky me, Sabine took off leaving me to do all the work with a bunch of idiot interns who can’t even figure out how to hang twinkle lights.” He let out an irritated puff of air even though his eyes never left Creote, “If one more person asks me how to fold a napkin into a rosette, I will cut a bitch, I swear to God.”

Felicity turned to him, “Is it okay that you’re up here then?”

“Nope,” he said. “I’ll probably get fired but this is totally worth it,” he breathed out reverently. “So incredibly worth it.” He let out a sigh of longing before shaking his head with a grimace, “Besides, I’m probably getting fired anyway. Sabine told our bosses that since Mr. Wayne and the Foundation’s board members have such faith in my vision that I should take lead which is why she took off like she did.”

“Who’s Sabine?” Gypsy asked curiously.

“My former boss turned nightmare,” Zander said grumpily. “Although she was always a nightmare, now she’s just a really inconvenient pain in my ass.”

“Think Cruella De Vil, only with less charm,” Felicity offered. “She even wears a dog coat with the head attached and everything.”

The younger woman wrinkled her nose at that, “Yuck.” She shuddered then turned to him, “At least she’s not your boss anymore though, right?”

“Yeah, except now she keeps saying things to the people I work with along the lines of me being ‘promoted to the highest level of incompetence, and how much she’s looking forward to seeing me go down in flames,’” he said grimly. “‘Flames’ as in ‘fired’, not as in the homophobic slur,” he added. “Sabine is a bitch but she’s not a homophobe. In fact, she kind of prides herself on the fact that husbands one and four were both gay. She’s like the Liza Minnelli of Interior Design.”

“What a cunt,” Thea said in sympathy. “Of course, if you pull it off, that’ll totally piss her off, so there’s that.”

“*If* being the keyword there.”

“You’ll do great,” Tam said waving him off. “After you told me what you wanted to do instead of that same old tired Great Gatsby theme Sabine trots out every year, I was the one who went to the board to get you put in charge, remember? If I didn’t think you could handle it then I wouldn’t have gone to bat for you in the first place.”

“I know, and thank you,” he said with a grateful smile. “I just hope I don’t mess it up otherwise Gannon and I are going to be eating Ramen noodles and frozen pizza every night while I try to
figure out how to fit our sectional in a cardboard box.”

Tam rolled her eyes at him, “You’re not going to wind up living in a cardboard box!”

“That’s true,” Renee said, not looking up from her tablet. “Worst case scenario, you guys can move in with Felicity; everyone else has.”

“True,” Felicity agreed.

“Well, I suppose since the dining room isn’t really being used anyway…” he mused.

“So what’s this theme that has Cruella’s panties in a twist?” Thea asked curiously.

“High Fashion,” Tam answered for him. “It’s going to be gorgeous! Plus, it’s brilliant since these things are basically fashion shows anyway. Instead of the usual black and white theme with rose centerpieces, the whole room is going to be filled with color. Think Paul Poiret, with swinging lanterns, colorful cushions in designer prints, and mismatched floral centerpieces. Oh, speaking of which, Zander had the brilliant idea of using the place cards with the names of the corporate sponsors as miniature lampshades on the electric candles we used in the table arrangements because all anyone ever does with those things is toss them out anyway.”

“So, it’s a murder mystery theme?” Renee asked looking up from her tablet with a frown. “And I thought his name was ‘Hercule Poirot’, not ‘Paul Poiret’.”

“No; Paul Poiret was a French Courtier from the early 1900’s,” Felicity explained. “Think Coco Chanel only more colorful.”

“Or don’t,” Tam interjected. “They hated each other. Poiret thought Chanel was boring and she thought he was tacky. There’s this famous story about how they met at a party where she was wearing one of her famous little black dresses. Poiret asked,” her voice dropped to a husky timbre with a heavy French accent, “‘For whom, madame, do you mourn?’, to which she replied, ‘For you, monsieur.’”

“Fascinating,” Renee said wryly. “Makes me want to run right out and buy a flapper dress.”

“Actually, I was planning on wearing a flapper dress tomorrow night,” Thea said reluctantly.

“Really? What color is it and who’s the designer?” Tam asked, suddenly distracted.

Thea opened her mouth to tell her when Helena interrupted, “Are you guys seriously talking about dresses right now when you could be looking at that” She asked, gesturing towards Creote.

“If you were into fashion, you’d totally get it,” Tam agreed before looking at Renee, “Anyway, just think of Poiret as like the Picasso of fashion and Chanel as Marcel Duchamp or Poiret as, say, John Galliano and Chanel as Dolce & Gabbana, only without the self-hating gay attitude and Anti-Semitism.”

“To be fair, Galliano never really apologized for the thing he said about Hitler but Dolce & Gabbana did take back the thing they said about gay marriage,” Thea told her. “Plus their clothes are a lot better than Galliano’s.”

“I still have no clue what you’re talking about,” she said shaking her head. “Sorry, doll, but I was a former cop, remember? I studied Criminal Justice in college, not Fashion or Art Appreciation.”
“Yeah, you would have been better off comparing them to Glock versus Walther or an AK-47 to a M16; we’re not exactly a artsy kind of crowd, if you know what I mean,” Lyla said distractedly.

“See, now that I would have gotten,” Renee agreed, hitching her thumb at the other woman with a nod.

“Whatever,” Tam said disgruntledly as she accepted the popcorn from Thea and continued to stare at Creote with the rest of them.

“That’s not…that can’t be…” Thea tilted her head and narrowed her eyes slightly, “Naw, that can’t be natural, can it? He’s got to be wearing a cup or something, right?”

“That or a whole drawer full of penis-shaped socks,” Helena said with a shrug.

“I always thought steroids had the opposite effect though,” Laurel said with a frown.

“I don’t think he uses steroids,” Lyla offered. “I just think he’s some kind of mutant or something.”

“I don’t know but, if it is 100% natural, then I’m defecting and moving to Russia,” Zander told her, tossing a few more pieces of popcorn into his mouth. “Hell, even if it isn’t, I might move there anyway. People still do that, right?”

Renee snorted, “Aren’t you supposed to be happily married?”

“Yes, but I have an opening on my list now that Clooney got remarried and is officially sticking to the whole heterosexual line,” he shrugged.

“I’m not touching that ‘opening’ comment with a ten foot pole,” Thea murmured to Tam.

“Ten foot pole is right,” the other woman smirked as she bobbed her head towards the Russian.

“What do you mean by your ‘list’?” Gypsy asked. “What’s a list?”

Helena rolled her eyes, “What are you; two?”

“No,” the younger woman said with a slight pout, “I’m almost nineteen.”

Helena shook her head at that, “Nineteen; Jesus fucking Christ.”

“A ‘list’ refers to a list of five people you’re allowed to do even if you’re in a relationship,” Lyla informed her. “When I was with Johnny, my list was Brad Pitt—before he got all shaggy and started looking like Robert Redford. You know, the old man version, not the Barefoot in the Park or really hot All the President’s Men one. Matthew McConaughey—”

Thea wrinkled her nose at that, “Matthew McConaughey? Really? He’s always half-naked and sweaty in public, and while I have no problem with either of those things, he also looks like the kind of guy who has an objection to using deodorant for some reason. That’s why I stopped liking Benjamin Bratt,” she said, her face screwing up in disgust. “Ever since I found out that he made Julia Roberts stop using deodorant and shaving her pits while they were dating…” she shuddered, “Forget it; no guy is worth furry, smelly armpits.”

“Exactly,” Tam agreed. “In fact, I’m pretty sure that’s why his career took a nose dive. That and his refusal to come back for the Miss Congeniality sequel. I mean, what kind of moron dumps Sandra Bullock, seriously?” She asked, shaking her head incredulously. “Granted, that movie sucked compared to the first one, but still.”
“I actually liked that movie,” Renee told them. “I was totally waiting for the mean FBI chick to slip Sandra the tongue at the end.”

“Me, too!” Thea said, looking at her with a grin. “I thought I was the only one seeing the sexual tension but they were totally into each other, am I right?”

“Looked like it from where I was sitting.” Renee agreed.

“They totally had heat,” Tam nodded. “It’s like in that movie Stepmom with Julia Roberts and Susan Sarandon. After the screen faded to black because Susan was dying, I used to pretend that she went into remission and that Julia dumped Ed Harris and they became lesbian moms together. I keep lobbying the people I work with to enter into negotiations for the film rights so we can do a remake with that as the alternate ending then cast Rosie Huntington-Whiteley and either ScarJo or Halle Berry in the lead roles. That or Kerry Washington,” she added. “She’d so rock the Susan Sarandon role and, even though Rosie may not be the best actress in the world, she is smoking hot, know what I mean?”

“Oh, that could work,” Tam said, her eyebrows lifting slightly at that idea.

“Or you could do a totally lesbian version of Stepmom, put ScarJo in as Julia with Kerry as Susan, then have Rosie in Ed’s role since he didn’t have all that many lines to begin with,” Gypsy suggested.

“Yeah, I agree. I may be straight but I’d still put any of those ladies on my list long before I’d put McConaughey on there,” Thea said pursing her lips in consideration. “Not that I have a list,” she muttered. “Right now I don’t even have a boyfriend, so…”

“I know what you mean, but I still like him,” Lyla shrugged, “He’s from Texas like me and he enjoys being naked which is a bonus, so what can I say? Moving on; Idris Elba…”

“Yes, to Idris Elba,” Tam said firmly.

“Hello!” Zander said, raising his hand in solidarity.

“Idris Elba is hot,” Thea agreed. “He reminds me of my stepdad in a weird way. Not that they look anything alike aside from both being from England and black, mind you. I’m pretty sure it’s just a combination of the accent and the fact that they’re both stone cold foxes, you know? They’ve got this whole dangerous yet polite James Bond British guy vibe going for them. Not that Walter would hurt a fly, but still, he is pretty built under those Saville Row suits of his.”

“I know what you mean,” Felicity chimed in with a low hum of approval. “They both look like they’re completely trustworthy, yet fully capable of destroying someone before politely asking for a cup of tea.”

“Exactly,” the other woman agreed.

“You have a crush on your own stepfather?” Renee asked dubiously.

Thea shrugged, “Ex-stepfather, and kind of. I would never act on it in a million years and it’s not a sexual attraction per se, but it’s definitely edging into crush territory. I’m pretty sure it has something to do with my lingering daddy issues.”

“Yeah, well, I have mommy issues but I have no desire whatsoever to make a move on my stepmom.” Renee shuddered, “She’d probably spend the whole time criticizing my technique before telling me that if I spent half as much time going down on dick as I do on pussy I’d probably be
married by now just like my ‘good’ brother, Benny, and my step-cousin, Rosemarie.” Her lips twisted in a look of disgust, “I can hear her now,” she took a deep breath before speaking in a high nasally voice, “You know, Renee; your cousin was all about the lesbianism in college but then she got highlights and now she’s married to a periodontist with three kids and a Dutch Colonial in Great Neck.” After that she’ll usually go on and on about how Edge News said Julie Andrews and Disney are part of some left-wing homosexual conspiracy to turn ‘normal’ little girls in lesbians through subliminal messages or something. I mean, gimme a break; like Mary Poppins’s pixie cut and comfortable shoes are to blame for the way I turned out.”

“Well, she is kind of the reason I turned out the way I did,” Zander said wryly. “Her and Maxwell Caulfield,” he sighed. “Say what you will about Grease 2, but between that movie and The Princess Bride, my pre-teen hormones had me saying ‘As you wish’ anytime and anywhere he wanted it. In fact, I’m pretty sure that’s where my fetish for tall blonds originated,” he mused.

Renee shrugged, “Yeah, well, I was too busy staring at Michelle Pfeiffer to notice and I know for fact that’s where my *my* fetish for blondes originated. That and brunettes, redheads, and women in black leather.”

“Black leather, huh?” Laurel said with a smirk.

She shot her a bawdy wink, “Red leather’s nice, too.”

At that, Sara shot her sister a pointed look causing the other woman to roll her eyes in exasperation.

“I’m surprised you weren’t putting on a pink lady neckerchief and singing ‘Cool Rider’ all summer long, instead,” Lyla grinned, turning to Zander.

“That, too,” he told her. “Plus I had a little ‘Genie in the Bottle’ Christina Aguilera thing to go with it.”

“I loved that song,” Thea said grinning happily from ear to ear.

“I was never allowed to listen to stuff like that when I was a teenager,” Renee said with a shrug. “Why, I have no idea. I guess my stepmom thought they would turn me into some kind of dick-hungry slut or something.” She snorted, “Talk about irony, huh? Should have made me listen to Lolita Pop when she had the chance.”

Thea narrowed her eyes at that, “You know, your stepmom sounds like a total nightmare.”

“She was,” the other woman said wryly. “A chain smoking nightmare in a pink muumuu who liked to collect poodle figurines. It was like living in hell.”

“Why didn’t your dad tell her to back the hell off?” Gypsy asked with a frown.

“Because he agreed with her,” Renee shrugged. “It’s this whole machismo pride thing. My mom left him to be with another woman and, ever since then, he’s gotten a little militant with that stuff. Which, when you think about it, was pretty hypocritical of him seeing as he cheated on her constantly when they were married,” she told them. “In fact, my stepmom started out as the other woman who got promoted to second wife the minute the divorce went through, probably because she was the only one willing to put up with his crap and because he needed to show that he was the more stable influence during the custody hearing.” She looked at them, “I found out about that later after overhearing some of my aunts talking about it. It explained a lot, let me tell you.”

“That’s rough,” Laurel said with a sympathetic look.
“It is what it is. At least I no longer have to listen to it any more since they officially disowned me a few years back.” She paused, “Well, not directly anyway, but every once in a while they send me messages through Benny about how they’d be willing to welcome me back as long as I agreed to stop being a dyke and repent to Jesus.” She sighed, “My brother can be a dick, too, but at least he still talks to me like a human being when he’s not reminding me about the fact that I’m killing our parents with my whole ‘being gay thing’.”

“He has a problem with you being a lesbian, too?” Thea asked with a sympathetic look.

“Not really,” she said with a shrug. “Actually, he’s pretty cool with gay people for the most part, it’s just that he suffers from middle child syndrome and is too busy begging for their approval to think for himself most of the time. My youngest brother, Nando, is cool though,” she said on a more positive note. “He got a full-ride scholarship to NYU through the Wayne Grant and splits most of his free time between the dorms and my place so he doesn’t really give a shit what they think. As for my ‘perfect’ step-cousin…” Renee rolled her eyes, “First off, Dutch Colonials suck, and she put this busy cabbage rose chintz wallpaper up in all the rooms along with wall to wall pink carpets. Frankly, it looks like Laura Ashley farted and died in there if you ask me. Plus, she collects these truly disturbing porcelain dolls that are everywhere including the bathroom. They look like something out of a horror movie, I swear to God.” Her eyebrows drew together in a pained expression, “Their creepy dead eyes stare at you even when you’re on the can trying to take a shit. I’m pretty sure her husband has a nanny cam stuffed in one of them, too.” Renee shot all of them a look, “He just seems the type. I mean, he puts his hands in people’s *m*ouths* for a living,” she said in emphasis. “Secondly, the only reason they could even afford that place is because it was in foreclosure and his dad knew a guy. And he’s not even a periodontist, he’s a dentist! She says it’s the same thing but it’s not. It just isn’t.” She grumbled, “Not that I’m bitter or anything.”

“‘Course not,” Lyla said with a snort.

Tam shook her head with a pained expression, “Cabbage roses and Laura Ashley? Really? Talk about being stuck in the bad part of the eighties.”

“That’s what you took from that?” Lyla asked her. “Not the part about the perverted dentist and the creepy dolls in the bathroom?”

“Really creepy,” Renee said with a shudder. “She has a thing about dolls with teeth so they’re all just staring at you with their mouths wide open like this.” She twisted her mouth into a grotesque open-mouthed grin, her eyes bugging out in a pantomime of some kind of death mask. “Ow, that hurt.” Her expression relaxed and she wriggled her jaw from side to side as she rubbed it, “Anyway, I’m pretty sure there’s some kind of underlying dental fetish going on there.”

Tam shrugged, “I try not to judge people based on their sexual proclivities and kinks. Their interior design choices though? Completely fair game.”

“I agree. I mean, save me from housewives who think they have taste,” Zander intoned grimly. “Every time I see a reproduction Duncan Phyfe dining set I just want to weep at the senseless tragedy of it all. That and it gives me flashbacks of my childhood when my mom would make us go to my Nana’s house for Thanksgiving.” He rolled his eyes, “My Aunt Kissy’s second husband, ‘Uncle Bob’--who was a dick, by the way,” he gave a disgusted noise. “I was so happy when she left him for their marriage counselor. Anyway, he would always try to goad me into playing touch football with him and my step-cousins, Little Robert and Bill, because he said I was too ‘girly’.” He snorted, “It was hell; sheer, pure, hell. I hated every minute of it.” He paused, “Until I turned fifteen and Little Robert started inviting his college roommate to spend the holidays with us. Craig Dickerson,” he said with a slightly naughty twinkle in his eye. “They were on the football team at
Loyola together; Craig was the quarterback,” he told them with a fond look. “He taught me everything I know about football. In fact, we hit it off so well that he asked me if I wanted to sneak out to the treehouse after dinner so we could continue playing with each other in private.” Again that mischievous grin lit up his face, “Afterwards, he told me he wouldn’t mind using me as a tight end anytime, if you know what I mean. I started liking Thanksgiving at Nana’s a lot more after that.”

“How utterly romantic,” Laurel said dryly.

“It really was,” Zander agreed. “God bless good Catholic boys. I still smile to this day whenever I see the maroon and gold. Gannon doesn’t know this but it’s the whole reason I didn’t fight him over adding the NCAA package to our cable bill.” He hummed a bar of the ‘Hail Loyola’ fight song under his breath before adding, “Of course, after that weekend I wasn’t as much of a tight end as I used to be.”

“So, in other words, you went from a tight end to a wide receiver?” Lyla chuckled.

“Oh honey, you have no idea, but I’ve never gotten any complaints so…” he said with a smirk then mused, “Gosh, that does bring back memories though. I wonder if he’s on Facebook?”

Tam made a gimme gesture for the popcorn, “Speaking of Idris Elba—and getting as far the hell away from that other subject as possible because if we start talking about looking up our former hook ups on Facebook…” she lifted her eyebrows slightly, “Let’s just say that social media takes up way too much of my time as it is. Anyway, I saw a movie where he was completely naked once; we’re talking the full Monty,” she sighed. “It was a terrible movie but still completely worth the price of admission.”

“How much of the Monty?” Felicity asked curiously.

“What do you mean, ‘How much of the Monty’?” Thea turned to her in confusion, “What’s more than the full Monty?”

“Well, I saw this Ewan McGregor movie once where he was completely naked—I mean, *completely* naked,” Felicity told her. “You saw everything; the front, the back, the really, really… back.”

“Like how back?” Sara asked her curiously.

“Like *back* back,” Felicity emphasized. “As in, I not only saw the full moon and the low hanging fruit, I saw the, um…” She held out her hand, her fingers splayed wide, “‘star’."

“The star,” Thea snickered, “I’m keeping that one! Along with the hand gesture because that’s what really sold it,” she said repeating the action in emphasis, “Star!"

“You’re welcome,” Felicity told her.

“What movie was this?” Lyla asked with a grin.

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “The Pillow Book, Trainspotting, Velvet Goldmine—to tell you the truth, the only movie I can think of offhand where Ewan McGregor wasn’t naked at some point is probably the Star Wars prequels.”

Gypsy frowned, “It would have made those movies so much better if he had been naked though. I always thought he and Amidala should have gotten it on, if only to make up for the travesty known as Jar Jar Binks.”
“True,” Felicity agreed.

“God, I’m surrounded by nerds,” Helena muttered.

“In that case, it was the Monty Python then, okay; happy now?” Tam offered sarcastically.

“The Monty Python,” Renee repeated, shaking her head. “Have I told you guys how much I’m enjoying being part of this whole group dynamic yet? You people can come up with some shit, I’m tellin’ ya.”

“We try,” Felicity said wryly.

“Speaking of pythons, I also wouldn’t mind doing Omari Hardwick,” Lyla added.

“Bitch, then you’re going to be fighting me because that’s my man,” Tam said flatly, her neck snaking back and forth as she lifted her finger in warning and wagged it in the other woman’s direction threateningly.

“Mmm hmm,” Zander hummed giving her a high five.

“Who the hell is Omari Hardwick?” Helena asked with a frown. Tam pulled up something on her phone then handed it to her. “Oh. Okay. I don’t know who he is or what he does, but count me in.”

“And,” Lyla said, giving a dramatic pause, “just to be fair; Angelina Jolie. I’m not really into women but, still, it’s Angelina freaking Jolie, you know? Who wouldn’t do her, am I right? I mean, Gia? Her body was ridiculous in that. Original Sin with naked Angie *and* Antonio Banderas? Terrible movie but, holy fuck that was hot. Can I hear an ‘amen’?”

“Amen,” Sara said roundly.

“I’ll second that,” Tam said holding up her hand. “Believe me, ever since I caught that movie on late night cable when I was thirteen, taking a big bite out of an Antonio/Angelina sandwich became my new goal in life.”

“What about you?” Lyla asked, turning to Zander.

“Pretty much the same as yours only swap out Matthew McConaughey for George Clooney and make it pre-Jennifer Aniston 90’s Brad from Thelma and Louise,” he told her.

“What about Angelina?” Gypsy asked with a frown.

“What about her? Like she said it’s Angelina freaking Jolie,” he said emphatically. “I’m gay, honey, but I’m not that gay. In fact, I don’t even think it’s possible to be gay enough not to like Angelina Jolie. She’s part of the gay millennial Holy Trinity; Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Saint Angelina of the Mick Jagger swagger and the redonk badonk-a-donk.”

Tam frowned at that, “I thought the Gay Holy Trinity was Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Saint Beyoncé the Bootylicious?”

“Holy foursome, then; I’d figure something out, trust me. Hell, *my* goal in life is to get adopted by the Jolie-Pitts just so that I can be breastfed by Brad.” He slanted his eyes towards her, “And yes, I meant to say it like that. Vivi and Knox and just lump it and get in line as far as I’m concerned.”

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind being breastfed by Brad myself,” Lyla offered. “Better yet, I wouldn’t mind breastfeeding Brad.”
Renee curled her lips up in disgust, “There are just so many disturbing images running through my head now…ugh. Thank you very much for that; now I won’t be able to eat cereal or look a baby in the eye for like a month.”

“I don’t care what you say,” Lyla told her. “Even with him being all old and shaggy, that man’s ass still makes my thighs sweat.”

Tam gave a wistful sigh, “Speaking of that, when I handed him his new clothes, Creote thanked me because he apparently, at least according to him, ‘hadn’t done it in a while’ and after he got through dusting the tchotchkes he was planning on, and I quote, ‘working up a sweat before taking a shower’.”

All eyes swiveled her way.

“Where?” Laurel demanded.

“And with who?” Lyla added.

“And does he need someone to hand him the soap?” Sara asked, joining in.

“I don’t know, but wherever or whoever, I’m planning on being there just in case he needs a work out partner or someone to help reach the really dirty places, if you know what I mean,” Tam replied.

“I knew I should have ordered a salmon ladder when Oliver mentioned it,” Felicity said dryly causing both Sara and Thea to snicker.

“You know,” Laurel said slowly, “if we jacked the thermostat up really, really high and put a fire in the fire place, maybe we could convince him to join us in a little hot yoga?”

Felicity pursed her lips in amusement, “I thought you hated hot yoga.”

“I’m willing to give it a second chance,” she said giving Creote a sultry look. “Especially if we can get it hot enough in here that he takes off his shirt.”

“I second that motion,” Tam said immediately. “All in favor?”

“Aye,” said several voices at once.

“Not me,” Felicity said with a sigh. “I need to work on some stuff in the, um, office instead,” she said, giving Zander a sideways look, “Oh, and Alfred arranged for the salon downstairs to stay open for us after the building shuts down so not really feeling the need to rock frizzy workout hair in front of people I don’t know.”

“Count me out, too,” Renee said shaking her head at their antics, “I’m not even interested in the fun size much less the jumbo version. Besides, I was under the impression that there was some debate as to whose team it was he played on?”

“Halleluiah and all praise the goddess Madonna and her little Baby Gaga,” Zander said lighting up.

“You’re still married,” Renee reminded him.

He shot her a dirty look, “I lost Clooney, okay; give me this at least.”

“Hear that? Even Renee thinks he’s hot for Draco; pay up,” Sara demanded, turning to Helena.

“That’s not the bet,” the other woman told her.
“Yes, it is,” Sara said firmly.

“No, Helena’s right; that’s only part of the bet,” Lyla corrected her.

“Okay, so what is the whole bet?” Zander asked them.

“That he’s gay—” Lyla began.

“Or bi,” Sara interjected.

The other woman nodded, “That Savant is gay or bi.”

“Who’s Savant?” He asked curiously.

“I’m with him; who’s Savant?” Thea asked as well.

“This totally hot but completely obnoxious British guy who looks like the lovechild of True Blood Season One with the hair and the cheekbones, Alexander Skarsgård, and ‘Legolas’ Orlando Bloom,” Tam told them.

“Oh, he’s definitely gay,” the other man said, nodding confidently.

“How do you know, you’ve never even met him?” Lyla asked.

“She’s right,” Gypsy said with a shrug. “Besides, he’s British so even if you had met him, who can tell?”

“Really?” Renee said, throwing her a dirty look.

“Eh, hate to admit it, but she has a point,” Tam told her. “It’s kind of a lesbian or German woman in comfortable shoes thing.”

The other woman paused at that, “Okay, I’ll give you that one but only because I was once thrown for a loop by some tourists in Birkenstocks who happened to stop by the girl bar I hang out at for directions.” She smirked, “Still got laid though.”

“Of course you did,” Laurel said wryly.

“Okay, British men and women with questionable fashion taste who happen to be fans of David Hasselhoff aside; how do you know he’s gay?” Lyla asked Zander once again.

“I know because there is a God and He loves me,” he told her. “Now where is this gorgeous bad boy who is absolutely no good for me so that I can stare at him while I name our imaginary children in my head?”

“He’s still in his room,” Gypsy said dryly. “Apparently he has jet lag so Creote said he’d bring him in a tray later because ‘Mr. Savant likes it when he ‘serves him in the bedroom.’”

“Who wouldn’t?” Zander snorted. “So what’s the rest of the bet? I assume there’s more to it, right?”

“Wait, not to be a party pooper here, but isn’t this kind of in bad taste?” Felicity asked. “I mean, should you guys really be betting on their sexual orientation like this?”

“Yes,” several voices spoke up at once.

“Look, it’s not like we’re caving into stereotypes or homophobia here,” Sara said in a reasonable
tone. “Other than the whole joke about British guys and lesbians in comfortable shoes thing.”

“That was no joke,” Renee told her. “I really did get laid and, afterwards, she made me Wiener Schnitzel.” Her eyebrows drew together at that, “I never knew what that was before but, turns out, it’s just another way of saying ‘deep fried veal cutlet’ only in German.” She shrugged, “Until she actually handed it to me I wasn’t sure if she wanted us to go out for hotdogs afterwards or if she was asking if I would be open to using a strap-on.” Her eyes glittered naughtily and she grinned, “In case any of you ladies are wondering, for the record, the answer to that would have been ‘yes’.”

“I call TMI,” Thea said holding up her hand in protest.

“Seconded,” Zander said, holding his up as well.

“Ignore that slightly disturbing and possibly offensive foray into international cuisine. Anyway, as to what I was trying to say,” Sara began to point to each of them in turn, “Lesbian, bi, bi, bi-curious, at least in the case of Angelina,” she said moving from Renee, to Tam, herself, and Lyla, “gay guy,” Zander, “college bi…and possibly in denial now,” she pointed to her sister who glared at her in response, “and the rest of you guys who I’m assuming are all straight, although I still have hopes for you, Cutie,” she said to Felicity with a wink, “And then there’s Nutsy here, but who knows what the hell she is?”

“Watch it, Tweety,” Helena warned.

“Plus black, Jewish, Latina, male, female--the point is that the spectrum is well represented here,” she said, ignoring the other woman. “We aren’t making fun or judging anyone; we’re just trying to make sense of the confusing social cues…while maybe making a few bucks and possibly using the Jolly Red Giant for sex later if he’s into that, okay?”

“Out of curiosity, what are these confusing social cues, anyway?” Thea asked. “Besides, of course, the fact that the big guy has been shaking his frankly amazing ass to techno since I got here but, then again, that could just be an Eastern European thing.”

“She has a point,” Tam interjected. “Russians do like their techno and discotheques. Germans do, too, for that matter and I’m pretty sure Legolas had a hint of German mixed in with that British upper-crust accent of his.”

“What about the way Red waits on his nibs hand and foot?” Sara pointed out. “Or do I need to remind you guys about the whole, ‘I bring you tiny sandwiches so you don’t get a tummy ache’ thing, not to mention how he brings him breakfast in bed? Oh! And what about how he insisted they share a bed last night because ‘he likes to be close in case he *needs* him’?”

“He’s his butler, or nursemaid, or whatever,” Helena said wryly. “It’s his job!”

“No, no wait; Sara’s right,” Tam chimed in. “Have you seen the way Big Red looks at him?” She asked pointedly. “Even though, if you ask me, blondie doesn’t deserve him, he’s obviously head over heels for the guy. I mean, look at him!” She said, waving in his general direction, “For god’s sake, he even cleans under the couch! I’m pretty sure my cleaning lady just shoves all the dirt under mine, *and* he even trims the crusts on his sandwiches. I mean, who does that? Tim’s lucky if I even order take out for him! I’m telling you, that’s true love right there.”

“So that’s what you’re basing this entire thing on?” Felicity asked them. “The fact that he listens to club music, looks at him occasionally, and made him finger sandwiches with the crusts cut off?”

“No,” Sara denied, “There’s more to it than that.”
“Like what?”

She sputtered slightly before answering, “Uh, my infallible gaydar, for one.”

“Infallible gaydar my ass,” Helena huffed under her breath.

“Why, do you think I’m wrong?” Sara asked Felicity while, once again, pointedly ignoring Helena. “I mean, you have to see that there is something there, right?”

Felicity shrugged noncommittally, “Why do you care if there is?”

“I don’t know, because I’m a romantic,” Sara said off-handedly.

“A romantic?” Helena scoffed.

“Yes,” she said, finally acknowledging her. “I’m a romantic who lives to see that true love finds it’s home in the hearts of those two crazy kids, what can I say? Now answer the question,” she said looking back to Felicity, “You usually have good instincts about this stuff; do you think they’re a couple or what?”

All eyes turned towards her. “Okay, fine,” she said taking a deep breath, “I think…” she pursed her lips, “I think, from what little I’ve seen so far, that Creote cares very deeply for Savant, that he’s worried about him, and that it obviously goes beyond just a professional relationship; I just don’t know if it’s reciprocated.”

“Okay, but do you think he’s in love with him?” Sara demanded.

She paused. “Honestly? Yeah, okay; from what I saw I’d say that Creote might have feelings for Savant and that those feelings leaned towards love.”

“Hah!” Sara said triumphantly. “I win!”

“No way!” Helena objected.

“She’s right,” Lyla said firmly.

“How do you figure?” Sara shot back. “The bet was that they were gay or bi.”

“But the rest of it was that they also have to be a couple,” Helena said while eyeing Sara smugly. “Neither of which you have proven and, until you do, all bets are off.”

“My gaydar is never wrong and Felicity agrees with me,” Sara shot back.

“Wait—hold on! I never--” Felicity objected.

“I don’t know about your gaydar but mine is pointing true north and saying that it wouldn’t mind getting a taste of whatever he’s got cooking, and I don’t care if he leaves the crusts on or off,” Zander said in low tones as Creote tucked the feather duster under his arm causing his bicep to flex. “Mmm mmm good.”

“All I know is that if they aren’t together, then I call dibs on the mountain,” Lyla said firmly. “The rest of you can have sloppy seconds.”

“Hang on,” Sara said quickly, “Why do you get first go at him? I say we should at least flip for it.”

“So you guys aren’t just objectifying him while speculating on his sexual orientation, but you’re also
planning on passing him around like your sexual plaything?” Renee asked in a disapproving tone.

“Wait, didn’t you try to pick up Felicity at a girl bar while she was on a date with somebody else? Not to mention the whole ‘strap-ons versus German cuisine’ discussion,” Thea asked pointedly.

The other woman shrugged, “I never said I was above all that, I was just, you know, mentioning it.”

“Right,” Thea drawled.

Sara gave Creote the once over, her eyes glittering naughtily, “I’m really starting to like Laurel’s hot yoga idea and I don’t care if it counts as objectifying him or not. In fact, right now I’m wondering how hot it would have to be to get him to take off his pants, too. Ooh, think maybe he’d be into naked Greek wrestling? I think I have some baby lotion in my carry-on or maybe we can raid the kitchen for some olive oil.” At Felicity’s pointed look, she shrugged, “Hey, like I said, sometimes you see a mountain and you just gotta ride it.”

“I think you mean ‘climb it’,” she said dryly.

“Climb it, ride it; same difference.”

“Still not batting for your league, sweetie,” Renee said absently as she continued to play her game.

“Hey, I bat for all the leagues,” Sara shot back.

“Let’s hear it for the bisexuals in the house,” Tam said, giving her a high five. “Sliding scale, baby!”

“Yeah, well, just because you’ve got some wiggle room on your slide doesn’t mean he’ll be slipping you his,” Renee pointed out.

“Besides, we have yet to get confirmation on just how slippery his slide is to begin with,” Helena reminded her. “Bet’s still on, remember?”

“Please. I know all I need to know, trust me,” Sara threw back. “As for how slippery his slide is, that’s what the baby lotion’s for.”

“Gonna need something to get that sucker up in there, that’s for sure,” Thea snickered.

“That might not be such a good idea, and neither is the thing with the olive oil. I’m pretty sure they said in health class that using stuff like that as lube can cause infections,” Gypsy said with a furrowed brow.

“First off, you shut up,” Helena told the younger woman before turning to Sara, “As for you, until I see proof, I’m not paying up.”

“Me neither, but speaking of slip and slides,” Lyla said with a far off look as the Russian did a low squat in order to pick up a rubber toy that had fallen under a side table and handed it to Ace who began squeaking it happily. “You know, something that big could completely wreck you, but it would be so worth the extra Kegels you’d have to do just to get back into fighting form afterwards.”

“Not to mention the reconstructive surgery you’d need when all is said and done,” Laurel agreed.

“Designer vagina!” Tam said with relish. “I’m so getting one of those after I have kids—that and Botox because I do not plan on spending the rest of my twenties and thirties on poopy diapers. I’m doing like my mom did and waiting until I’m forty so I have a good excuse to give up my gym membership and then, when the kids are old enough, go for a tummy tuck and facelift instead.”
“I think I could manage it without the surgery afterwards,” Sara shrugged. “Not the kids part, the other thing. After all, I think experience has proven I’m nothing if not flexible.”

“It’s not about flexibility as much as it is elasticity,” Thea said pointedly. “I mean, I know the human body is capable of handling a lot but that would be like taking something the size of a small garden shed and turning it into a four car garage.”

Renee’s face screwed up in disgust, “Oh, I did not need to hear that shit.”

“You’d be surprised at how much you can take before the elastic goes bad,” Tam told her. “Remind me to tell you about my adventures through Europe sometime.”

“Europe?” Thea asked, her interest peaked.

She nodded, “I went to Le Fémis after Sarah Lawrence and, let’s just say, I received quite the education.”

Lyla’s eyebrows shot up at that, “Really?”

Tam hummed, “If you want to talk four car garages then you definitely need to head to Italy and check out the size of the salami they’re packing down there.”

“I knew there was a reason you were so stuck on that Italian guy,” Felicity said wryly.

“What Italian guy?”

“That guy Alessandro or Alfonso? You know, the one that gave Dad angina,” she told her.

“Oh! You mean Jean Arnaud; he wasn’t Italian, he was French!” Tam hummed happily, “Haven’t thought of him in a while. Word of advice; always go to a Frenchmen if you want to learn how to give and get great oral. I mean, seriously: wine, smelly cheese, rudeness, kissing, and oral sex. That’s what really put France on the map.”

“I love French men,” Lyla mused. “For that matter, I love Italian men. Hell, I’d settle for the Dominoes delivery guy’s sausage at this point. I haven’t had sex in almost a year, thank you very much,” she griped. “Honestly, it’s gotten so bad that I get turned on from just opening a fresh pack of batteries.”

“It’s been almost a year for me, too,” Thea commiserated. “I finally broke down and bought one of those nubby things that go on the end of an electric toothbrush.” She grimaced as the others began to snicker, “You laugh, but Lyla has a point. I mean, this is the longest I’ve ever gone without sex in my life. I’ve been using my little bathroom buddy so much that the other day I felt myself getting excited during a toothpaste commercial.”

“At least now you’re all minty fresh down there, right?” Helena said with a shrug.

“I can shoot you with an arrow, you know that, right?” Thea shot back.

“Go for it, Speedy,” Helena drawled. “You shoot me and I’ll take away your toothbrush and replace it with a box of Efferdent.”

Gypsy wrinkled her nose, “What would that do besides fizz up?”

Helena turned to the younger woman slowly as the others tried to hide their snickers unsuccessfully. “I will hit you if you keep it up. Just don’t talk to me anymore.”
“What did I say?” The other woman blinked, as Helena rolled her eyes in response.

“I haven’t had sex in…what? Seven months? Maybe more?” Laurel frowned. “The worst part is that, unlike you guys who are actually doing something constructive and sexually reaffirming like going the battery-powered route, I decided that maybe it was time to get a cat instead.” She paused, “God, that’s just depressing.”

“It’s not…that depressing,” Felicity said reluctantly then frowned, “Wait, weren’t you and Oliver together right before you went into rehab?”

“We were in a cooling off period,” Laurel said ruefully. “I mean, first we broke up because I found out about him and Sandra and then, well, the,” she glanced at Zander, “motorcycle accident happened and we couldn’t have sex while he was recuperating, so…”

“As I recall that particular bone wasn’t the one that was broken,” Lyla pointed out causing Thea to shudder with disgust and Gypsy to snicker.

“Yeah, well, let’s just say that, by then, he was already interested in someone else,” she said glancing at Felicity who flushed slightly.

“It wasn’t like that—“ Felicity began.

“I know,” Laurel said waving her off. “But, for the record, it was like that; for Oliver anyway. Besides, it’s just as well; I was starting to use again and going off the rails; adding sex to that would have been a disaster. Then again, every serious relationship I’ve ever had has been a disaster.”

“Put me down for that one, too,” Lyla said clucking her tongue. “My track record is so bad, I wound up divorcing the same guy twice.” She shrugged, “Well, divorced once, then…whatever,” she said with a slightly haunted look before seeming to cheer up again, “Anyway, the worst part is that Johnny’s still the only guy I’d ever consider going down the aisle with and, since I don’t exactly have time in my busy schedule to troll the bar scene…”

“Wait, why would you even consider going back to this Johnny guy if you’ve already left him twice?” Zander asked with a frown. “I mean, honey, take a lesson from La Liz, get the diamonds, kick Dick to the curb, and run like hell.”

“Yeah, well, I was Burton in this equation, not him,” she said somberly. “Both times we broke up it was totally my fault. I just couldn’t figure out that whole work/life balance thing, you know? I was always on the road, always going from one assignment to the next, wound up losing our baby, more stuff happened.” She closed her eyes and grimaced, “In the end, I wound up losing the job, the guy; everything.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” Zander said with a sympathetic look.

She nodded, “Thanks. Still, even if we had the baby, who knows if we’d still be together or not? I mean, I want to think we’d have found a way to make it work, but we were always playing catch up it seemed like. Both of us were always on the roll, know what I mean?” She exhaled roughly, “Our daughter probably would have seen the nanny more than she saw either of us.”

“You would have made it work,” Felicity said confidently. “Dig would have made time, I’m sure.”

“Maybe, but the job stress still would’ve been a strain on our relationship even without all that.”

“Yeah, but you guys looked like you were handling it fine, at least for a while there,” Felicity offered. “Now that you’re not working for ARGUS anymore, who knows? Maybe you and Dig will
“get back together someday?”

“Yeah, what Felicity said,” Thea said, rubbing her arm supportively.

“Maybe,” Lyla said with a melancholy smile. “We do have a habit of getting re-married after we get divorced, so who knows?”

“What line of work are you guys in anyway?” Zander asked. “I mean, I know Tam works for Wayne Entertainment but I have no idea what the rest of you do, and no one ever said.”

“We work for a charity—all of us,” Felicity told him.

“What kind of charity?”

“It’s an anti-trafficking charity called the Orbital Organization,” she answered smoothly as that cover was practically ingrained in her by then. “We work mostly with law enforcement agencies to provide support and technology as well as relief efforts for victims of human trafficking all over the globe.”

He gave them a curious look, “That’s really admirable, but I had no idea that working for a charity could be that hard on a relationship.”

“We travel a lot, so that takes a toll,” Lyla told him.

“How much traveling do you guys do?” He asked with a frown.

“A lot. I rarely even have time to unpack before I’m being called back to fly a team to Russia, China, Africa,” she told him. “Like Felicity said, we travel all over the world to some pretty remote places, delivering food, blankets…”

“The occasional psychopath to an ARGUS Supermax that happens to be located on a deserted island where they always seem to escape anyway…” Thea said under her breath.

Zander turned to her in confusion, “What?”

“She said we sometimes drop off relief aid workers to some pretty dangerous areas,” Felicity cut in smoothly. “Things can get pretty stressful.”

“Wow, I’ll bet,” he said with a furrowed brow before turning to look at all three ladies “So do you all think your inability to find someone has something to do with your jobs? Because, I don’t know you girls that well, but I’m sure we can find you somebody if we put our minds to it. My husband knows lots of single guys on the force, a few ladies, too--”

“No cops,” Lyla, Laurel, and Thea said at the same time.

“Oh, um, why not? What’s wrong with dating a cop?” He asked, taken slightly aback.

“Nothing,” Lyla assured him. “It’s just that I’m former military and every guy I’ve ever been with has either been military or law enforcement and I’m trying to break the pattern so no cops, no soldiers, and absolutely no spooks. The next guy I get involved with will be something boring like a… a… I don’t know; an accountant maybe, something like that.” She wrinkled her nose, “On second thought, no bean counters either. There’s dull and then there’s too dull.”

“You could always try dating a billionaire,” Laurel offered wryly.

“That’s true,” Renee said with a smirk. “In my experience, they tend to be a pretty staid bunch and Felicity just so happens to know a few. I hear she even has Daniel Garret’s personal cell and,
according to People’s 100 Most Eligible Bachelors list, he’s still single.”

“You read People?” Thea asked her curiously.

“Just for the articles and then only when I’m on the john,” she told her. “I also read Playboy but that I read for the pictures.”

Thea shook her head in amusement, before turning back to Lyla, “What do you say? Feel like wrangling yourself a boring billionaire type like Bruce or Ollie?”

“Hell no,” the other woman said firmly. “No billionaire ‘playboys’ for me either. I was thinking maybe a dog groomer or a vet or something, that way I can get laid and keep Ace in kibble and worming medicine all at the same time.”

“Plus, Daniel was an ass,” Felicity offered. “A good looking ass, but an ass.”

“Then again, so are Ollie and Bruce,” Laurel said ruefully.

“That’s another habit I’m trying to break,” Lyla said ruefully. “No more assholes or adrenaline junkies for me; just nice normal guys with boring jobs who happen to be fantastic in bed, thanks.”

“Well, good luck with that, honey,” Zander smirked. “What about you two then?”

“I’m with Lyla,” Thea told him. “No cops, no military, and definitely no more ‘charity aid workers’! No sirree, no more adrenaline junkies for me either. Just give me humdrum and hung like a horse and I’ll be happy.”

“Charity aid workers are adrenaline junkies?” He asked dubiously.

“Charity aid workers are adrenaline junkies?” He asked dubiously.

“The worst,” she assured him.

“Good to know,” he said with a sigh. “Okay, so what about you?” He asked turning to Laurel last. “Because, I hate to tell you this, but the supply of relatively young, hot, and straight men in this city, who have real jobs that pay actual money, is pretty limited and you girls are giving me absolutely nothing to work with here.”

“What does that mean; ‘real jobs that pay actual money’?” Gypsy asked in confusion. “What kind of job doesn’t pay money?”

“Actors,” Tam and Zander both said at the same time.

“Although, to be fair, actors do make money,” Tam added. “Only most of it comes from waiting tables. Same thing goes for screenwriters, aspiring novelists, and musicians.”

“And the ones in Gotham that do make money at it, aren’t usually interested in what you girls got going on,” Zander said half-heartedly. “I hate to bring up that old cliché about people in musical theatre, but there you go. Finding a straight boy on the Great White Way is like looking for a needle in a haystack; they turn up occasionally, but you gotta do a whole lot of digging to find them.”

“Yeah, well, we’re from the West Coast so I know what you mean. Although, there are a lot more straight actors out there then you’d think,” she shrugged. “I’ve actually had the opportunity to date a few of them but I’m planning on saving the role of ‘sugar mama’ for my cougar years that way we can hit our sexual peaks together and I can afford to keep him in thongs and suntan lotion between auditions.”
“Good plan,” Tam commended.

“I thought so. Anyway, while I appreciate the offer, my dad’s a cop and…just no. Sorry, but no,” Laurel told him. “As for if my bad streak is connected to my job? Maybe. Then again, it could be because most of them were also connected to my ex; first him, then his best friend, then I tried dating another guy I thought was his friend that turned out to be a psycho, then him again—” she screwed her face up in a grimace, “I’m pretty sure Oliver’s penis is cursed.”

“It’s like Voldemort’s magic wand,” Helena agreed. “Can you say ‘Accio Asshole’?”

“Hey, watch it; the Harry Potter shtick is mine,” Renee griped. “You know, if you guys would just date women you wouldn’t have this problem,” she pointed out as she presumably continued to save her garden against zombies. “Plus, I guarantee you’ll get three times the sex with less than half of the bullshit.”

“Three times the sex?” Thea asked dubiously.

“No refractory period,” Renee said smartly. “Girls can go on and on and on, honey bunny. Now, I’ve known a few women who get theirs then they’re done, but they are few and far between. After all, women are natural nurturers and most of the ladies I know,” she winked at Laurel pointedly, “myself in particular, think the only thing better than introducing their partners to the concept of ‘multiple orgasms’ is introducing them to the concept of the ‘full body marathon orgasm’.”

“Marathon orgasm, huh?” Laurel asked wryly.

“Yup,” she said proudly. “It’s my own invention; twenty-six hours’ worth of orgasms with regularly scheduled rest breaks so that the participants can refuel and rehydrate.” She gave her a smug look, “Most people only do the bare minimum when it comes to a one night stand; an hour or two, maybe eight if it’s a weekend—and that includes sleep time, mind you. I, however,” Renee hitched her thumb toward her chest and paused for dramatic effect, “give my hook-ups the full twenty-four hours plus a couple extra because I’m all about treating my ladies right. Plus, I’m self-employed so I can afford the occasional Monday morning, post-weekend straggler.”

“I haven’t known you long but I can already tell that you’re completely full of shit,” Lyla said, shaking her head with a grin.

“No, I’m not,” the other woman denied. “When it comes to getting laid right, and making sure my ladies leave my bed happy and smiling, I don’t play around. That’s why I get so much repeat business, if you know what I’m sayin’, I take pride on a job well done,” she said firmly. “Besides, there’s nothing a gay woman loves more than to show a straight girl the error of her ways.” She made a slightly disgruntled noise, “Of course, nine times out of ten, you’ll wind up breaking our fucking hearts before going back to your shitty excuse for a boyfriend who refuses to go down on you and forgets your birthday—see my next to the last girlfriend—*but*, while you’re into it, you straight girls are nothing if not enthusiastic. Just ask Ellen the next time someone brings up the whole Anne Heche thing.”

“I never liked Anne,” Tam said with a scowl. “She gives bi-girls a bad name. Plus, she had the crazy eyes and then she tried explaining away the whole ‘temporarily gay’ thing by saying she was possessed by some guy from Atlantis who apparently had a thing for semi-butch lesbians turned lipstick-lite.” She shook her head, “Portia de Rossi was a definite step up for her if you ask me. Not only did she get Ellen the whole Covergirl deal by teaching her that you can rock sneakers and pantsuits and still know how to use moisturizer properly, but she’s a lot hotter and a better actress. And, by the way, Arrested Development never should have been cancelled. Anybody who didn’t like that show is a fucking asshole.”
“I agree,” Thea told her. “I tried to get Ollie to marathon it with me on Netflix but he said he had more important things to do with his weekend then watch a stupid sitcom.”

“Did you tell him it wasn’t really a sitcom?” Tam asked. “I mean it is but it isn’t. Plus it won six Emmys and a Golden Globe, for Pete’s sake!”

“I tried telling him that but then he argued that if it got cancelled then it doesn’t matter how many awards it got because people weren’t watching it so it couldn’t have been that good of a show in the first place.”

“He didn’t,” Tam said flatly.

“He did,” she scowled. “He said, ‘If it was such an amazing show, then people would have watched it.’ Then he said, ‘I’m so sick of people telling me that I need to ‘catch up’ on all these supposedly wonderful TV shows like Arrested Development and Entourage,’ and that the people pushing that ‘crap’ on him were ‘the most annoying, oppressive, and myopic people he’d ever met,’ and that they needed to get their butts off the couch and get a life.”

“Fucker,” Renee said with a disgruntled expression. “Entourage was my jam.”

“He said people were myopic?” Laurel said with a frown. “I didn’t even know he knew how to use that word correctly in a sentence.”


“Are you sure?” She asked.

She paused, “Mostly sure…”

“Yeah, well, then he went on a tear about how he was also tired of ‘the media’ telling him to watch a show that they probably never watched either.” She let out a frustrated breath, “I mean, I get that he’s busy—we’re all busy—but he was laid up and recovering from surgery so it’s not like he had anywhere to go, you know? What’s worse is that he claimed people just said they liked shows like that because ‘hipster’ do that sort of thing and that they were just fads like gluten-free diets or Twitter.”

Even Helena raised her eyebrow at that one, “Oliver said ‘Twitter’ is a fad?”

“He still thinks Facebook is a thing,” Felicity confirmed. “In fact, he still talks about his MySpace page even though I’ve begged him not to repeatedly.”

“That’s so sad,” Zander said shaking his head.

“Yeah, well, when he said ‘hipster’ like that, I felt like going out and buying him a pair of those old man pants they wear pulled up to their chests with the built in belt and a big jug of prune juice,” Thea snorted. “I don’t know why I expected anything different from him. The one time I made him watch ‘Girls’ with me, he said it was overrated and that he preferred the ‘nostalgia’ of shows like MadMen and Downton Abbey instead. I’m pretty sure the only reason he liked Downton Abbey in the first place is because it was my turn to pick the show and he fell asleep the minute it started. Said it was one of the best naps he’d ever had.”

“What about MadMen then?” Gypsy asked.

“That one he liked because of the tight dresses and Cristina Hendricks’ tits,” she rolled her eyes. “I love my brother, but sometimes…”
Laurel turned towards Renee, “Told you he was an asshole.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Renee told her wryly. “I kind of thought he’d be more into Peggy though given his taste in women.”

“She has a point,” Thea said looking at Felicity pointedly. At the other woman’s chastising look, she said leadingly, “I’m just saying, fuck around boss, secretary turned partner who covers for him at work and is constantly bailing him out even though he doesn’t appreciate her…”

“Funny,” she told her.

“But true,” the other woman shrugged.

“She has a point,” Thea said looking at Felicity pointedly. At the other woman’s chastising look, she said leadingly, “I’m just saying, fuck around boss, secretary turned partner who covers for him at work and is constantly bailing him out even though he doesn’t appreciate her…”

“Funny,” she told her.

“But true,” the other woman shrugged.

“Yeah, well, not a MadMen fan,” she told her. “If I wanted to see women passed up for promotions and told that men were more qualified based on the fact that they had the right genitalia, I would have stayed in IT.” She paused, “Although I actually liked it down in IT, I just would have liked it more if my supervisor wasn’t an idiot who kept giving my office away to other people because he kept forgetting I worked there.”

“I never watched that show,” Gypsy told them. “In fact, between working at Orbital and going to school, I don’t get to watch much of anything really. I do watch Ellen though because I can sometimes catch it between classes when I’m hanging out in the student lounge. I always thought that if they ever made an American version of Doctor Who, she’d make a really cool female Doctor.” She turned to all of them. “She has this whole Doctor Ten vibe going for her. I’m pretty sure it’s the shoes and the dancing. That and the really great hair.”

“Huh,” Felicity frowned, mulling that over. “You know, she kind of does actually.”

“Like I said, I’m surrounded by nerds,” Helena said grumpily. “And who the hell is ‘Doctor Ten’?”

“That’s it,” Felicity said turning to Zander. “As soon as you can get to it, we need to install a big screen with surround sound because we are having a Netflix and Pajamas weekend ASAP.”

“I’ll talk to the head electrician and the foreman about maybe installing a hidden drop down in front of the fireplace or something,” he agreed.

“Why would you want that?” Lyla asked her pointedly. “You’re probably one of the only people here getting laid on the regular! If I were you, I’d be spending all my free time having marathon sex with the Greek god I was engaged to, not surrounded by women in my jammies while watching Doctor Who and shoveling pizza in my face.”

“Actually, I was thinking about ordering Chinese food instead…” Felicity muttered. “It’s healthier than pizza, plus eggrolls.”

“Speaking of which,” Lyla said, ignoring her and turning to Renee, “getting back to what you were saying about women being better in bed than men; how would you know that if you’ve never been with one? Unless that gold star of yours isn’t as shiny as you claim it is?”

“She’s got a point,” Laurel agreed with a smirk. “If you want to tempt us towards the forbidden fruit then you gotta back that shit up.”

Renee offered her an amused look, “That so?”

“That’s so,” Laurel agreed.
“If you really want to know I could just show you,” she said raising one eyebrow and offering her a filthy grin. “You know what they say; actions speak louder than words.”

She shook her head, “Thanks, but I think I’ll just settle for the words, for now.”

“For now, huh? Meaning that you might be willing to get to the ‘action’ part later? Nope, you guys aren’t flirting with each other *at all*,” Sara said quietly then grinned unapologetically after her sister shot her a censuring look.

“I know,” Renee said with a low, sexy drawl, “because simple logic dictates that anything a man can do, a woman can do better…and if she can’t, then there’s an app for that,” she told her with a superior look before setting aside her tablet.

“An app?” Lyla said dubiously.

“The age of Wi-Fi, my friend,” Renee answered smoothly. “Remind me to show you my collection someday when you’re feeling ‘adventurous’. Not only can I fully satisfy my partner in every way but, and I don’t care what your guy is packing, science has progressed to the point where I don’t even have to be in the same room to get the job done. Makes those out of town trips a little less stressful; one tap on my phone and it’s all silicon plug and play. Lesbians are truly God’s chosen people.”

“I’ve been telling them the same thing for years but no one believes me,” Sara said wryly.

“She’s right,” Tam agreed. “If it weren’t for Tim I would so go back to girls fulltime.”

“Huh, I really need to get that app,” Thea said ruefully. “I’m starting to wear out my toothbrush and it’s my third one in six months.”

“Remind me when we go on our Fred and Ginger Girl’s Night to take you by my favorite toy shop; Babeland on Mercer in the West Village,” Renee told her. “It sells toys and stuff but it’s run by women and caters mostly to a lesbian clientele so it doesn’t have a bunch of creepy guys milling around the joint in trench coats. They also have an online store but if you go in you get to play with them before you buy.”

Thea’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, “Play?”

“Not ‘play’ as in *play*, but they have a display table set up so you can hold them and test the power output plus they do demos and classes and stuff,” she told her. “I’m friends with the owners. Some asshole was hassling them and I put a stop to it by flashing my badge and told him that if he didn’t like the idea of his girlfriend preferring plastic to his ugly ass then he needed to take it up with her. Just tell me when you want to do it and I’ll let them know so they can set up something special for us.”

“Yeah, why not?” Laurel said dryly, “Dildos, dinner, and dancing; sounds like a night out with the girls to me.”

“It is in my case anyway,” she agreed causing Thea to snicker in response.

“I’m sorry, but there are some things you just need a man for and no amount of silicon and smart phones can take the place of the real deal,” Lyla said firmly. “Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“What about oral?” Sara asked her.

“Plus there’s…” Tam wiggled her fingers pointedly.
“Yeah, but that’s mostly just foreplay,” she told them. “Still doesn’t take the place of a good hard you-know-what, know what I’m saying?”

“It does if you do it right,” Renee disagreed. “Especially if you use more than *just* your fingers.”

Gypsy looked to Thea, “Is she saying what I think she’s saying?”

“Yup,” the other girl said slowly.

“Huh,” she frowned. “So, all things being equal, that means Renee’s even more hung than Creote.”

Renee grinned at their banter, “Sort of puts things into perspective, doesn’t it?

“Fine, I’ll give you that one,” Lyla conceded. “Even so, flesh and blood beats anything you can buy off the shelf because if I had someone to do that with, then I wouldn’t have to spend a fortune on batteries every time I go to grocery store to pick up my Lean Cuisines and tub of ‘So what if my ass gets fat because I’m going to die alone anyway’, because there’d be a live body in my bed instead.”

“I’m not gonna argue with you on that one, sweetness. In fact, if you ever need to save a few bucks, just let me know and I’ll be right over to show you my version of the real deal,” Renee told her with a wink.

“Appreciate that, thanks,” Lyla said dryly.

“That would be a cool idea though,” Gypsy mused out loud.

“What would be a cool idea; having sex with Renee?” Laurel asked with a snort.

“The girl’s not wrong,” the woman in question said blithely.

“No,” Gypsy said flushing slightly, “the idea of creating a phone app that could…you know,” she said pointedly. “I mean, if you could invent an app that could turn a phone into a sex toy, you’d make a fortune because everyone would be downloading that thing. Plus, you’d save a ton of money on batteries and you wouldn’t have to worry about hiding them in the bottom drawer of your nightstand whenever people came over to your apartment, or going into one of those stores with the creepy guys Renee was talking about.”

“It would be more convenient,” Renee admitted. “Have phone will travel, know what I mean?”

“Yeah, but even if you did invent a phone app that could do it all, then you’d still have to spend a ton of money. After all, those waterproof phone cases don’t exactly come cheap,” Thea joked.

“She’s right,” Felicity said with a frown. “You’d need it, too; electronics and moisture don’t mix.”

“Unless, of course, you invented phone condoms, too,” Gypsy argued.

“You could make money coming and going,” Thea snickered.

“Not to mention hand over fist,” Sara tossed back.

“Phone condoms?” Helena broke in incredulously. “Who the hell would walk around with ‘phone condoms’ in their pockets? What if you got a call while your cell was all gloved up? You’d have to rip the thing off and risk damaging your phone. That, or you’d wind up frying the thing because they’d probably come lubricated and…” She stilled, “And I can’t believe I’m actually taking part in this conversation. How did this become my life?”
"It would give a whole new meaning to phone sex though," Lyla mused. "And people would be better about putting their phones on vibrate rather than making you listen to their annoying ass ringtones all the time."

"Unless, of course, their asses are where they put it," Helena suggested. "And, again, I can’t believe I actually said that out loud without the benefit of either copious amounts of alcohol or weed."

"Then you’d not only be redefining the term ‘phone sex’ but ‘butt dialing’, too," Felicity said with a pained expression.

"Don’t forget about ‘sexting’," Laurel reminded her.

"True," she nodded. "I wonder what kind of emojis that would spawn?"

Gypsy turned to her with a furrowed brow, "Is it wrong that I kind of wish I had a keyboard in front of me so I could figure that out?"

"No," she told her, "Especially since I was pretty much thinking the same thing."

"I don’t think so," Tam said with a frown. "Not to the emoji idea, because I’d probably use a ‘shove it up your ass’ happy face a lot; I meant ‘no’ to the thing with the butt phones. Trust me, from a marketing standpoint, it would be a disaster. Even if your initial sales proved profitable, once people get the idea to shove their cells up in there, things could get really messy, really fast, and who wants to clean that off their phone much less put it up to their faces afterwards?"

"Gross," Gypsy said with a shudder.

"And besides, think of the liability issues," Laurel added. "Depending on how popular they are, if they aren’t wearing pants or at least some really absorbent underwear, then someone could potentially slip and fall. We’re talking about a monster amount of widespread class action lawsuits especially after you take into account how many people use their phones while out in public."

"‘Wide spread’," Renee repeated with a snicker.

"I just love the fact that I am surrounded by people mature enough to have a serious discussion about the potential merits and liabilities of phones you put up your asshole," Lyla said wryly.

"I love girl talk," Thea agreed. "You can’t get this kind of stimulating conversation back in Starling, nosirree."

Zander gave them a disgusted look, "Ugh. Okay, as nice as it was catching up with all of you girls, I need to go because this is getting a little too graphic even for me," he said getting up from the couch. He paused for a moment, looking from Creote to Tam, "But while we’re on the subject of phone sex, if he takes off his shirt send me the video," he told her.

"Already on it," Tam said, waving her phone.

Zander headed for the door then stopped to tap the much taller man as close to his shoulder as he could reach which, as it turned out, was more like his scapula.

"Yes?" Creote asked politely as he removed the ear buds from his ears.

"I just wanted to say, I think you’re doing a fabulous job," Zander said with a toothy grin. "Here," he said handing him his business card.
The other man accepted it with a look of confusion, “Um, thank you?”

“I don’t know if you clean houses on the side, but if you’re ever available, call me,” he told him.

“I don’t, um…” the Russian looked down at the card and arched his eyebrow, “Have any pockets,” he said in heavily accented English.

“Ah,” Zander breathed as his eyes dipped lower. “Here,” he said, reaching into his jacket for another card, “take two then in case that one gets lost.”

“What you,” Creote said reluctantly taking the second card, “I do not know if my schedule will allow for it, however.

“Three should be enough,” he said, looking at him strangely.

“I’m sure you can find ten, fifteen minutes, maybe an hour or two. I mean, I live practically right around the corner from here. In fact, here’s another card just in case you change your mind,” he said handing him another one. Then pointed to it, “That’s my cell phone, my voicemail, office, email, landline, twitter. Hashtag #call me,” he said brightly as he held his hand up to his ear. “It’s a really small apartment. You don’t even have to do windows,” he assured him. “Or floors. Or much of anything really. Just…” he took a deep breath, waving his hand in a vague gesture towards the other man’s very broad chest, “come as you are.” Zander’s eyes swept over him with one last look of longing before he turned to leave, “Are you sure you don’t need another card?” He asked, turning back suddenly. “Because I can draw you a map on the back…?”

“Okay then,” he said cheerily, taking one last look at him before letting out a soft sigh and walking out the door, “Happily, happily married,” he muttered just before the door closed behind him.

The Russian looked at the business cards in his hand before turning towards the women with a frown, “Your friend is very nice, but very odd.”

“No, I do not,” the other man said with a perplexed expression. “But in any case, I am happy where I am for now, but thank you.”

“You just said a mouthful, buster,” Thea agreed.

“Yeah,” Lyla nodded. “Say, Creote; how do you feel about hot yoga?”

“Hot yoga?” He blinked, “What is hot yoga?”
While the others tried to explain the concept of ‘hot yoga’ to their Russian houseguest in hopes of seeing him bend, flex, and sweat in as few clothes as possible, Felicity and Renee retrieved Mordred from where he was hiding in the kitchen and made their way down to the Cave instead. After a quick confab, the two of them took off down the tunnels on Renee’s motorcycle promising to return after their mission to take Bruce and Oliver on a tour of Orbital, leaving Felicity able to work on Watchtower in private.

If the other woman was curious as to why she wasn’t joining them, she didn’t say anything, nor did she question why Felicity wanted them to keep her informed as to how it went rather than just asking Bruce directly or joining them herself, a fact for which she was heartily grateful. Having spent the majority of her vigilante career working with masks who would question whether or not the sky was blue if for no other reason than to be contrary, it was nice to finally work with people who understood that when you told them you didn’t want to talk about it, you meant it. Even better were people like Renee who understood that without even having to be told; she just accepted her request to be kept in the loop, offered her a flirty wink, then took off with Mordred who was grinning from ear to ear on the back of her Harley, his expression reminding her of a kid about to meet his favorite superheroes brought to life...which, in this case, he was.

Poor guy, she thought. He was in for a real disappointment once he realized that most masks, even though they were, by nature, noble and self-sacrificing heroes who deserved both admiration and respect, were also complete and utter assholes when you got them good and riled up about something. And Oliver and Bruce together in the middle of Orbital while on a tear? Yeah, he was in for a fun afternoon all right.

Even if she weren’t currently avoiding them, Orbital was the last place she’d want to be right now. Actually, the only place she wanted to be at the moment was right where she was; alone and working quietly by herself with no distractions, with no one there to try to coax her out of her funk.

Although she trusted the Birds implicitly, and while she knew she could probably benefit from talking things out, she also knew that particular discussion needed to be between her and Bruce and no one else. She might be on an emotional rollercoaster when it came to her personal relationships but, no matter how many times Bruce was going to put her through the same loop the loop, she knew better than to talk about it with anyone, including her closest friends. Like Peggy always said, ‘A relationship is between two people, not three or more, and once you invite someone else into your private business, it’s hard to show them the door.’

“Peggy always was fond of giving out advice that rhymed,” she said to herself with a grimace as she began checking the firewalls while running code.

Another thing she used to say is, ‘Follow your heart but always take your brain along for the ride,’ and lately it felt like her brain was on permanent stand-by.

For instance, now that she’d had time to cool off, she could see that *maybe* she could have handled things better. After all, it’s not like his behavior that morning came out of left field, and he was stressed out, not just from the whole Talia thing, but from having his territory and home invaded by all of Team Arrow. She could even understand how the prospect of having Oliver become a permanent fixture in their lives would make him go a little man-stupid.

“Then again, if him being man-stupid was a one-time thing, then maybe I wouldn’t have gone off at him in the first place,” she argued aloud. “Seriously, I think I’ve earned the right to lose my shit at least once. God knows he never hesitates to fly off the handle every damn time something comes up, now does he?”

Maybe later, when she was ready to deal with him again, she’d try putting herself in his place and
take a moment to imagine what it would be like to have one of his hostile and still very interested ex-lovers that he admitted to still have feelings for as a perpetual third wheel in their relationship while helping to raise their child. She was pretty sure that with role models like Lucius and Mama T, she could figure it out—in time. It might take a while, but she could do it. Still, she wasn’t quite ready to be all reasonable and sympathetic to his feelings; not right now. At the moment she was still processing her feelings, and if that made her selfish then so be it, but talking to him right now would just lead to more problems. Especially if he decided to have it out with her in the middle of Orbital. She knew him well enough to know that, despite his insistence that he’d behave in a professional manner when they were in ‘mission mode’, Bruce was far too fond of blurring those lines when it suited him.

“That’s half the problem right there,” she muttered, hitting the keyboard with slightly more force than was necessary.

Besides, she probably didn’t need to be there. She was fairly certain they wouldn’t find anything of value at the facility even if Mordred did manage to hack into the protected files. Chances are Talia knew her cover was burned, or soon would be, and she was smart enough not to keep anything that sensitive on the Gotham facility’s mainframe. After all, she was practically begging Felicity to invite Bruce to tour the facility, probably if for no other reason than to be able rub it in later when she did her big reveal.

“Bad Guy rule number one; they always have to make a big production out of everything,” she said shaking her head in annoyance. “Can’t just shut up and kill you; no, they have to dress you like a doll and pour plastic down your throat, or hold syringes filled with Vertigo to your neck. Or, oh yeah, swords while they go on and on about how they should have been the ones to get the girl.” She harrumphed at that, “Right, because what girl doesn’t dream of landing a delusional psychopath of her very own?” She rolled her eyes, “And let’s not even talk about the Poo Pirate with the alligators and his ‘I’ll make you my Queen of the Underworld’ spiel while ranting about how his ‘beloved minions of the deep’ will ‘rend his enemies to shreds’ and ‘feast on their bones’,” she scoffed. “I mean, yeah, the puppet guy pissed me off when he tried to stick his hand up my skirt, but at least the dummy did all the talking for him.”

No, if Talia was going to make her move it would be tomorrow before or during the Gala. Bruce would be at his most vulnerable since all eyes would be on him as he walked the red carpet and for the duration of the event, and thereby couldn’t act as the Bat without outing himself. It was the perfect moment to strike.

In fact, none of them could suit up, Felicity thought with a frown. Dick and Tim, now that they were back in town, would have to attend the event as guests otherwise rumors would start back up in the tabloids about their strained relationship with Bruce. The papers were already having a field day with the Miller thing, adding that to the fire would only serve to further erode the public’s faith in Bruce and in Wayne Enterprises as a whole. After all, if your own kids refuse to support you, then why should they?

Luke would have to show up to support their parents, as would Tam since she was on the board—not that she was ready to patrol the city on her own despite her advanced martial arts training and limited experience as Tim’s sidekick/girlfriend. Laurel had been in the suit for almost two years and she was still treated like a rookie by most of Team Arrow.

And speaking of…

Oliver and the rest of his team were going to be there mainly to keep an eye on Isabel so they wouldn’t be patrolling at all until after the event. She’d already gotten word from Tatsu that she’d be
join them there (or rather Tam had when she got her size so that she could supply her with an
evening gown for the event), and the rest of the Birds would be attending as well.

A fission of unease came over her as she contemplated that. She didn’t like the idea of putting all
their proverbial eggs in one basket but it was pretty much their only play. After all, if Isabel asked
why her team were all there, she could say that she got them tickets to the event in order to foster a
spirit of teamwork. Not only that, but having them there made it appear as if she didn’t suspect
anything was amiss.

Isabel and Talia knew that in order to enter the building or the main dining area, all attendants had to
pass through security checkpoints and metal detectors so she and the rest of her team would be
unarmed. While they were a lethal enough group without them, it would still add to the illusion that
they were still in the dark about her real identity as Talia al Ghul. She also wasn’t all that concerned
about them sneaking in their own men. The only ones with firearms or weapons of any kind would
be members of Wayne Security, the vast majority of whom had military or law enforcement
backgrounds and who had been vetted better than most Secret Service agents before being hired on.

These guys were the best of the best, that’s why Bruce hired them in the first place. The men
DioGuardi would have assigned to the event would know to keep track of all wait staff and
attendants. They wouldn’t just be relying on nametags with pictures. The company Bruce used for
his events were used to catering for high profile events, celebrities, even the President, so every man
on duty that night knew who was and was not supposed to be there and if any strange men in waiter
uniforms showed up, the rest of the staff knew to alert them immediately.

She had no idea what Talia was planning or how she thought she was going to get to Bruce so she
could have her revenge, but it wasn’t going to be by using the same old dime a dozen badguy
strategy of mixing with the crowd and sneaking in guns or toxic gas, that’s for sure.

“Amazons crashing through the windows maybe? Or a full-on air assault with armed helicopters?”
She asked out loud.

Doubtful, she decided. The Wayne Foundation building was the largest structure in Gotham and
even Amazons would have a hard time scaling a building with that much wind shear to fight against.
Plus, according to the news, there was a storm front coming in which would make it even harder to
get to from the outside.

In fact, the storm coming in was probably the reason why Zander was so frazzled. It wasn’t
supposed to hit until after the Gala started but she already knew from years past that when they came
up against inclement weather, they would put up a hard plastic ‘tent’ at the entrance in addition to the
awning and have ‘Umbrella Attendants’ to lead everyone from their cars so they wouldn’t get wet.

“Snipers?” She offered up.

No. The ‘tent’ Bruce used wasn’t just some thin plastic sheeting, it was a high composite bullet
resistant polycarbonate like they used on the Pope-mobile because the Foundation Events were
attended by a lot of people who tended to attract a lot of attention, himself included. Bruce may be a
control freak, but he was thorough. Even the Umbrella Attendants would be members of Wayne
Security and would be wearing body armor under their tuxedos. They would be instructed to use a
flanking procedure for each guest with a minimum of three security officers on Umbrella escort; one
at the car, and two to the tent, after which one officer would remain at the start of the receiving line
with his umbrella at the ready for the next guest while the other stayed with them until the entered the
building. The guards would also be lined up on both sides of the red carpet, both for crowd control
as well as to minimize the risk of bodily harm to the guest in case someone did pull a weapon.
The Foundation Gala wasn’t just as well attended as the Oscars, it was better protected; Bruce prided himself on that. After all, he was a businessman as well as the Bat and the Gala wasn’t just a charity event, it was an advertising campaign. People tuned in to watch the show as it played out and when they saw how everything ran like a well-oiled machine, business went up. It was the reason she wasn’t worried about an air assault either. That had been tried before as well.

One of Batman’s rogues thought he would ‘kidnap’ Bruce Wayne so he tried using a helicopter and machine gun to get through the clear barrier surrounding the penthouse. Not only didn’t he get through it, but the penthouse was built with a reinforced steel ‘shell’ that was designed to automatically come down over all the windows and doors in case of potential breach, turning the whole thing into a safe room. The minute the first bullet hit the sensors on the glass or walls, it was automatically tripped. If not, then it could be activated manually, or simply by stating the password out loud since the penthouse was fitted with state of the art cameras and audio sensors. Even though Felicity disabled those sensors from running full-time for obvious reasons, she couldn’t disable the underlying security program which was on failsafe for that very reason. It might not be actively recording, but it was always on. That was one of the reasons why Felicity felt so safe there when she first got back into town.

Whatever Talia and Isabel had in mind, their plan was to have J’onn babysit the Wonder Twins (aka Creote and Savant), while Big Barda, Sonja, Booster, and Ted all remained on duty at Orbital. As far as she knew, neither of them were aware of the fact that the two women were still in town and they’d both managed to keep a low profile since coming to Gotham. If anything happened at the facility, they could put it on lockdown until the Calvary arrived. The Foundation Building sat on the very edge of the East End and, even running along rooftops, her team would be on top of it in a matter of minutes.

That said, she still thought of the Orbital facility as a low priority target. Granted, it was less secure than the Foundation because it was her building and she knew all of its vulnerabilities, but that was also what made it a far less likely target. Why attack a building you already own, especially when it’s supposed to be empty? No, if her instincts were right (and they probably were because even smart villains were fairly predictable), if anything went down it would happen at the Foundation, so having the teams together made sense.

She would have to go over the plan with everyone later once Bruce and Oliver got back from their field trip, but she wasn’t going to worry about that until she absolutely had to. All she wanted to do for now was clear her head while avoiding the subject of her increasingly messy love life for a few more hours at least.

The first thing she did was finish running the scans for any viruses or back doors into Watchtower’s programming. Although there had been a few attempts, presumably by ARGUS, they held but she strengthened the firewalls anyway and left a message for Barbara about it so she could do the same for LAIR.

She didn’t call her directly, just dropped her a quick text. Even though it was early afternoon in Gotham it was barely mid-morning in Starling and she didn’t want to risk waking her up after she’d been manning coms for Roy and Sin all night long. As a rule, vigilantes were not early risers, nor were they morning people, Barbara being no exception. If she really thought her LAIR system was vulnerable, she might have but, again, her targets were here, not in Starling, so why go after them? The system would be inactive since they shut it down when they left the foundry for the night, the only things probably running were some background programs and nothing else. The most they could do long distance is blow her system up ala the Clock King. But, as much as the idea of her babies getting fried pained her, she also knew that Barbara kept a mobile version of Watchtower in the form of an encrypted laptop. Even if she lost it, she could go to any public terminal or, now that
she had her LAIR coding, a smart phone, and still access Watchtower along with everything else. They’d be fine, at least as far as tech was concerned.

As for the stuff not covered by virus software and firewalls, Dig let them know over breakfast that morning that he’d talked to Barry before he left just in case they needed his help, but that he and his team were to be on stand-by only. He also let them know that he’d briefed Barry and Team Flash on what was happening in Gotham, as well as the connection Team Arrow had made with Batman and his associates. Lance, seeing a chance to goad Oliver a bit, took special delight in letting Bruce know that the Flash’s tech guy, Cisco, was a huge fan and wondered if he would be willing to call him sometime just to talk…or at the very least, give him his autograph. He then repeated the remark Barry had made about how now that they had all dated the same woman, it sort of made them friends (a joke that did not go over well with either man, but Bruce especially).

Also, while Oliver considered Barry an ally (except when he was reminded of his and Felicity’s brief flirtation, even though it never went anywhere), he didn’t like handing off his territory to anyone. When he objected to the fact that Barry had been called in without him being consulted about it beforehand, Diggle reminded him that he could just as easily have called in Daniel instead, especially since the possibility of League involvement was a very real threat. Besides, these days he and Ray spent most of their time traveling between Hub City and Ivy Town, neither of which were all that far from Starling when you considered the fact that Daniel liked to fly around in a jet tricked out to look like a flying blue scarab, and Ray apparently had a super suit ala Iron Man.

That shut him up fairly quickly.

It also managed to aggravate Bruce to no end, after which Alfred added to the stress by mentioning that Mr. Garret probably would not have been able to assist them in any case since he was on the Foundation Gala’s guest list, although he had no way of knowing if he was planning to attend as he never sent an RSVP.

No one cared for that bit of news, Felicity especially, but she doubted Daniel would show. Unlike Bruce and Oliver, he’d never been interested in maintaining the whole ‘playboy billionaire’ shitck and preferred to spend his free time adventuring instead. The most he’d do is send a check as he didn’t even bother sticking around for business meetings half the time, choosing to leave the running of the day to day operations to Ray while he scoured the Amazon for rare herbs that might prove to someday cure cancer, or repelling into a live volcano so he could gather samples of Thermophilic eubacteria like lithotrophs that oxidize sulfur to sulfuric acid and that could someday unlock new energy sources while cutting down on air and waste pollution.

That was one of the things that first attracted her to Daniel actually; his hands-on spirit of adventure combined with his lack of guile…or so she thought. The way he had initially presented himself to her was as a tragic hero of another kind; one who had redirected his pain and grief in such a way that he didn’t need to wear a mask in order to save the world.

…And then she found out that, not only did he wear a mask, but that he and Ray were the ones actively trying to take down Oliver along with his team which, coincidentally, included her.

“Jerk.”

She made a disgruntled noise as she allowed the patches and scans to continue to run as she moved onto another, more enjoyable project. Oliver and Bruce used sticks and training dummies to relax, Felicity used hacking and forgery. In fact, the only thing she enjoyed doing more than hacking was creating a new identity for someone from scratch, and, since she ordered herself lots of toys for the FelicityCave she hadn’t yet gotten to play with yet including a top of the line digital card printer complete with an embosser, laminator, and strip magnetizer, this should be fun.
Of course, forgery required a certain amount of hacking and cyber-vigilantism as well. Oliver would often make fun of her when she tossed around her threats about draining people’s accounts and tanking their credit scores, but it was in actuality a very effective tool in her arsenal. Guys like Bruce and Oliver who fought for justice with their fists, and pointy hurtly things like batarangs and green-tipped arrows, often forgot about the fact that Al Capone got taken off the streets, not by masked vigilantes and tough as nail hardboiled cops, but by a government bean counter who, when you think about it, was kind of a hacker of sorts from back in the days before computers. It was the exact same mindset a hacker had; take them down by shutting them down. Kill the machine and everything else dies with it.

“Case in point,” she said aloud as she started her hack in the place where most identity builds began; the money. The money was the machine that ran the beast. It wasn’t exactly original or creative, but like Lance had once told her, “Every cop worth his salt knows to always follow the money trail right to the bad guy’s door.”

The way he told her, whenever investigating a crime the first thing a good cop asks is ‘Where does the money come from?’ and ‘Where does it go afterwards?’ because, 99% of the time, there are five main motives (not the only motives, but the most likely ones) for any given crime: money, power, heat of passion, sex, and revenge. And, of all of them, money took the lion’s share which was probably where the old axiom, ‘money is the root of all evil’, came from. It was certainly Lance’s favorite go to saying…that and, ‘You’re a dumb ass,” although that was usually leveled at the male members of Team Arrow, not her.

Of course, according to him, stupidity could be considered a motive, too, but that was pretty much a given. As for the other one percent, their motive for doing what they did was due to the fact that they were simply batshit crazy.

He also made sure to tell them that vigilantism fell under that category as well, hence the third favorite saying, ‘You’re a bunch of batshit crazy dumb asses!’

Again, it was an insult usually reserved for the male members of their team, not her.

Every time Lance said that though, Felicity was always tempted to point out that, technically, he was just as much a vigilante as any of them. She didn’t though because, even though his heart was doing a lot better since he’d had the valve replacement, there was still a chance his head might explode. If anyone was going to clue him in the fact that the only thing he was missing was a mask and a cool handle, it was going to be either Sara or Laurel; not her. He was their father, not hers, so they had first dibs when it came to killing him.

When it came to her version of cyber-vigilantism, Felicity liked to mix things up just make it interesting so, taking Lance’s ‘advice’, she began to hack her way into a few not-so-well-hidden bank accounts belonging to a couple of big name mobsters she knew Helena would be familiar with as they were closely associated to the Bertinelli Crime Family, then drained them into an off-shore account but not before laundering the money by bouncing it from one mob-run bank to the other just in case these particular scumbags had someone on the payroll that was smarter than the average bear. She didn’t want to start a mob war (well, maybe a tiny one, a war against one mobster maybe), she just wanted to confuse the hell out of them. and having everyone pointing fingers worked for her so she made sure to also drain a few Triad accounts, along with the accounts of some of the more temperamental higher-ups within Bratva, then passed all of them through one Bratva member’s account in particular so that, on the off chance someone managed to follow the breadcrumbs, that’s where they’d all be piled up.

She didn’t completely wipe out every Bratva account though, tempting as it might be. While she
wasn’t particularly fond of the Solntsevskaya Bratva, she didn’t mind Anatoly that much so she left him and his guys alone for the most part. Not entirely, she had to make it look good so she only selected his most vulnerable accounts, the ones not entrusted to the banks held by the Brother’s Circle or Grisha Mikhilov, mostly because she’s the one who strengthened those firewalls for him as a show of good faith. Instead she made a couple of deliberately clumsy attempts to get past their firewalls but it was just for show. If she really wanted to get past them she could since she wrote the code, but that would have made things too obvious.

Even though she was technically stealing from him, albeit only a token amount considering the billions she was taking from everyone else, she doubted Anatoly would mind. Knowing him, he’d say a few million dollars was worth seeing her take down one of their mutual enemies, even if it led to a few suspicious rumblings by some of Ivan the Terrible’s crew. Even if she hadn’t lobbed a few gimmes at his firewalls, he probably wouldn’t have minded taking on a little heat as, these days, he could probably weather it fairly easily since he was in good graces with the Circle once more. However, it wasn’t that big of a deal and she had the time so she figured, ‘might as well’. She was already logging in on another screen to send him a nice case of his favorite Stolichnaya vodka, several tins of Strottarga Bianco caviar, and some Tula Gingerbreads and Turkish delight with the money she’d taken as a wink and a nudge to let him know what she did in their own special code they’d worked out together over his favorite hangover remedy; a huge plate of warm chak-chak smothered in hot honey sauce.

The morning after he and Oliver had been cleared of the charges against them, he introduced her to the sticky sweet confection that reminded her of a cross between homemade pretzels and funnel cakes. Just thinking about them made her wish she’d done like Mordred and gone straight into the kitchen for a sandwich after she’d first arrived.

Chak-chak was made from soft dough and raw eggs, then molded into short delicate sticks that looked similar to homemade vermicelli or marbles. They were then deep-fried and placed in an elegant pile before the nearly boiling hot honey was poured over them. He then told her to slowly sip at her tea that he’d fortified with the same vodka that bit her on the ass the night before until it cooled enough to harden.

Before they tucked in, he thanked her for all she’d done and told her that he would get his revenge for the insult Ivan Pajari paid her during his and Oliver’s ‘trial’. In order for her and Sara to be allowed to stay within the compound, Anatoly had to declare them pochetnyy doch’, his honorary daughters. As such they were entitled to certain courtesies as a sign of respect for Anatoly’s place as a high ranking Pahkan despite the charges being leveled at him. That Pajari had accused both her and Sara of being his American whores was bad enough, but when he further insulted Felicity in particular by calling her his ‘second-best bitch’, along with a few comments about her physical appearance, even the other members of the Council were enraged by his lack of respect.

Anatoly had kept silent at the time, making sure to calm Oliver down as they allowed the other Pahkan’s to address his breach in etiquette, but he told her that that he had not forgotten the words spoken that day, nor would he forget all she had done to save them. He told her he was a patient man and would lie in wait until the day came when he would have her honor avenged and he would send her a plate of chak-chak as a sign along with a bottle of ’45 Château Mouton-Rothschild since Oliver never did give her the ’82 he promised her.

Knowing his kind of revenge was likely to be fairly bloody, she steered the conversation towards a more playful note and asked, “And what happens if I get to him first? What do you want me to send you?”

He sat back in his chair, the stern and serious expression he wore replaced by his more usual
mischievous grin, and said, “Ah, moy milyy angelochek, if that should happen then you can send me a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka fit for a czar, caviar made of gold, gingerbread like moya mama made me as a boy, and some Turkish delight from the little shop I would go to back when I was stationed in Istanbul, for that is something I would greatly enjoy tasting once more.” He gave her another flirtatious wink and leaned close to her, speaking in a near whisper, “Even though I am certain it could never taste as sweet as whatever revenge I suspect that you, with your innocent face but demonically clever mind, could conceive of.”

After that, their companions finally came down the stairs to join them, and he continued to celebrate his good mood by regaling them with stories that were half-fact, half-fish tale, but all very entertaining.

Besides, once they saw that her firewalls held while the others controlled by ‘Ivan the Terrible’ failed, it would increase their value as assets to the Bratva…although Bruce would have a cow if he ever heard her admit she did a favor for one of the most powerful Pahkans in the world or that she had a fondness towards a man rumored to have been responsible for an assassination attempt against Anwar El Sadat.

She had no idea if he really did it or not, chances are ‘not’ since Anatoly was fond of playing the role of harmless old man who enjoyed telling tall tales to pretty young girls, but she liked him anyway. She didn’t underestimate him however because Anatoly, despite his beatific smile and old-world manners, was a very dangerous man and he didn’t earn the name ‘the KGB Beast’ for nothing.

He was a character though, despite being scary as hell. According to what Oliver told them (even though finding out about his past was like pulling teeth), Anatoly was both a CIA and KGB trained assassin who worked very closely with Putin’s FSB while running the Mechanics division, ‘Mechanics’ being another word for ‘assassins’ within Bratva. They mostly dealt in murder for hire, as well as off-book government contracted black bag ops like political assassinations, hence the Anwar El Sadat rumors.

She only heard that rumor herself after Oliver had been forced to give them a brief history of the Bratva last year. He also revealed that he got that star his chest (along with the rank of Bratva Captain or, more accurately, Brigadier) because he served as Anatoly’s Avtoritet (‘Authority’) while in Russia under the codename ‘the Solntsevo Demon’.

They found *that* out, because a corrupt Russian cop with a grudge against the Brotherhood named Gregor Dosynski had taken up the mantle of the Demon that Oliver had left behind and was using it to target members of the Brotherhood in his name. He was angry because he’d been accused of colluding with their rivals, the Tambovskaya Bratva, resulting in the slaughter of a high ranking and well-liked Captain, along with his family and most of his men. Oliver was ordered to torture the truth out of him. As a result, Dosynski lost an arm and nearly died.

Oliver still felt a lot of shame for his part in that, even though Dosynski really was responsible for all of those deaths in a way. He didn’t sell anyone out for money, but he did make the mistake of bragging about his connections and about how important he was to Bratva, so much so that he was even in charge of protecting the secret location where this guy was hiding out. The person he said it to during pillow talk happened to be a high-end prostitute…who also just so happened to work for the Captain of the Tambov Gang and who was, in turn, the one gunning for the other guy to begin with.

Apparently, by Bratva law, stupidity erections and their resulting consequences put you in just as bad a position with the Brotherhood as selling out for a bank full of cash, if not more so.

“Let’s face it,” Felicity said wryly, “even greed’s a better excuse than not knowing whose mistress
you were schtupping before spilling the beans over a blowjob.”

The thought occurred to her then that if Bruce did play back audio from the Cave, he would have a lot of questions in reference to the things he heard her say while talking to herself.

Anyway, Anatoly’s men tossed him in the river thinking he was dead but, as was often the case with people Oliver thought he killed in the past, he came back as a complete and utter pain in their asses.

“Because no one ever stays dead for long in Vigilante World, do they?” Felicity muttered.

To his credit, once he figured out how to reign in his libido, Dosynski bided his time until the perfect moment presented itself. When that time came, it led to Anatoly being accused of trying to make a power play by taking out his fellow Pakhans and thereby increasing his chances to become Krestnii Otets or ‘Godfather that controls everything’ over the most elite group within Bratva known to only a very few as the ‘Bratsky Krug’, or ‘Brothers’ Circle’. They were the council within the vorovskoi mir, the traditional Soviet/Russian underworld, that ruled over all 9000 members of Bratva.

Also known as the Family of Eleven, it was overseen by a 12-person council made up of eleven representatives from each of the ‘brigades’ and one arbiter, the Krestnii Otets, who acted as the final authority in all things within the proceedings. The Brother’s Circle was such a well-kept secret, even among the Bratva, that not even the authorities knew if it was real or just another mass conspiracy myth being tossed around in chatrooms.

The group would meet regularly in different parts of the world, often disguising their meetings as festive occasions, and no one but the other members of the Brother’s Circle knew who was who, or where and when the meeting would take place. When the members of that secret cabal started dying it at first appeared random but it quickly became apparent that it wasn’t when the last presiding Krestnii Otets, a man named Ivan Raidenovitch Raikov, was murdered in Starling City just before he was expected to announce who he had chosen to take over as his replacement.

Anatoly had been called in to meet with the rest of the Circle members and, as soon as Raikov was found with an arrow through his chest, he was arrested and Oliver was accused of being behind the assassinations under Anatoly’s orders. They immediately sent out a squad of men to kidnap him from outside the club in order to ship him back to Moscow where he and Anatoly would be forced to submit to a ‘court’ that was presided over by three Pahkan of the Bratva known as the Soviet Vorov, or the Council of Thieves.

Once she found the footage and traced where it was they were taking him, she, Dig, and Sara had no other choice but to go there in order to act as Anatoly and Oliver’s ’ochevidetz’, (or ‘beholders’), then help them hunt down Dosynski so they could clear their names and bring him to whatever justice the Sovet Vorov chose to dish out.

As for why they were called the Council of Thieves, being referred to as a ‘thief’ in Bratva wasn’t considered an insult, instead it was a status symbol as the founder of Bratva, Sergei Mikhailov, a former waiter who’d served a prison term for fraud, coined the term vory v zakone, or ‘thief-in-law’, in order to create a sense of brotherhood and to establish their street cred as they recruited foot soldiers among the various gangs and criminals both in the prison system and outside of it.

Not that ‘thief-in-law’ was the same as, say, ‘brother-in-law’, as she first assumed. The term ‘thief-in-law’ meant ‘thief who follows the law.’ In other words, a criminal who obeyed the Thieves' Code or ‘Ponyatiya’, was one who swore to obey the rules of conduct within the Bratva that governed them all. Therefore the Soviet Vorov, or Council of Thieves, represented the highest court among the Bratva and their word was law.
Felicity was familiar with similar codes of conduct within Cosa Nostra, or the Sicilian Mafia that Helena’s dad belonged to. The Mafiosi were known among themselves, not as thieves, but as ‘men of honor’ or ‘men of respect’, and followed their own version of laws known as the Ten Commandments--not to be confused with the ones from the Torah. Instead they were merely guidelines on good, respectful, and honorable conduct that men entering the organization were expected to follow like ‘Don’t sleep with your friend’s wife’, ‘Wives must be treated with respect,’ and ‘Don’t steal from other men of honor’.

However, the Bratva laws were far more complex and carried much more weight than even the rules of conduct among the Italians and Sicilians. It was a set of rules that held within it an almost mystical weightiness that included its own language and esoteric symbolism. That’s where the significance of the tattoo Oliver wore came in.

She’d always wondered about the eight point star with the rosette in the center that Oliver had tattooed high on his chest and above his heart. She’d always assumed it just meant ‘Captain’ until she saw another man with similar tattoos, only on his knees. They were watching as the men sparred in the courtyard and she asked if he was a double captain or a major or something before she could stop herself even though she’d been warned that the Vory consider talking to ‘protected women’ as taboo within the confines of the Council of Thieves.

To the Bratva, there were ‘good’ women, who were to never be touched or even looked at as they were considered ‘pure’, and then there were whores who were used for sex but that’s all. They even had to wear scarves over their hair whenever they were outside their private rooms at the compound to show that they were ‘pure women’ or ‘women of status’. As Sara explained it, once a Bratva man had sex with a woman who wasn’t their wife, she no longer held value, and no Bratva man would ever consider having a real relationship with a whore.

Frankly, it rankled as it was the most blatant Madonna/whore paradigm Felicity had ever been a firsthand witness to.

“And when I found that out, oh boy did that explain a lot about Viva las Isabel and Oliver’s lost weekend in Moscow,” she muttered under her breath.

Still, within the grounds of the Council of Thieves, she and Sara were treated as the honorary daughters of Anatoly and, even though he was accused of a crime, the Vory would not harm them but they also wouldn’t be allowed to look or speak to them either unless it was to address them during the proceedings.

To her surprise though, the young foot soldier laughed and told her that the stars on his knees (that looked nothing like Oliver’s on closer inspection as they were more of a nautical star without the rosette center) meant he was Vor and that he ‘bent his knees for no man’; in other words, he recognized no authority but Bratva.

Since he seemed friendly and talkative, she then asked him why his stars looked different than Oliver’s and why his didn’t have the rosette design in the center. The man got very quiet then and what he told her explained so much about why Oliver was there and why, whenever he revealed that mark, people gave him such a wide berth.

The star high on his chest and above his heart meant he was a Captain, but the rosette in the center meant he was one of Anatoly’s as it symbolized death, meaning he was a Captain of Bratva who carried Death within his heart. The fuzzy indigo linework of the tattoo had significance as well as it meant he received it in prison. After he told her that part, she covered up her reaction to that bit of news by saying she was surprised they let prisoners have tattoo machines in prison as she’d heard that gulags didn’t have a whole lot of creature comforts. He laughed again and explained it like this
The ink used in making the tattoo was slightly blurred as it would have been extracted from a ballpoint pen and mixed with rubber from burning the heel of a shoe. After which, they combined the soot with urine to prevent infection, and injected it into the skin utilizing a sharpened guitar string attached to an electric shaver. If they didn’t have a machine they would’ve drawn the picture they’d chosen on a wooden plank, placed needles along the lines of the design, then covered the needles with the ink mixture and stamped the whole tableau on the person’s body, or they could simply slice the image onto the skin with a razor, then daub the cut with indelible ink.

From what he told her it was an incredibly painful process no matter what method was used, far more painful that the ones you got at the tattoo parlor obviously, and that the bearer of the mark would have to endure the entire procedure without so much as flinching, otherwise he would be thought of as weak. The more tattoos a man had, the more prison time he would have served as that’s how you earned your right to a tat, and each tattoo represented both their rankings (depending on where they were placed) and criminal specialties so that their brothers could know their criminal résumé simply by looking at them.

After he said that she looked around the yard at the other Vory, all half-dressed in the frigid cold, some covered in tattoos from head to toe, as they pummeled one another mercilessly without so much as a grunt of pain and realized that, despite the refined furnishings and exquisitely maintained lawns, it was a prison filled with an army of very tough, very dangerous men who had no fear of pain or death and, unless they played their cards right, they were all going to be joining Oliver and Anatoly in front of the Sovet Vorov, and not as their ‘beholders’, either.

Bratva justice was nothing to scoff at. If you broke with the rules of the Brotherhood, not only would you die, but every member of your family would as well. It helped that Dosynski had no one left that could be targeted but turning him in had still been a hard decision for them to make as it was a guaranteed death sentence and they would not show mercy. It would be a painful death that would be drawn out for as long as possible.

Of course, they didn’t have to live with their guilt for long since he managed to break free before they could turn him over. Due to the tracker Felicity managed to slip on him, they managed to catch up with him before he took out the Sovet Vorov with a bomb filled with nerve toxin known as Novichok, or ‘Newcomer’, which was eight times more lethal than even the V-series nerve agent used in the Chechen attack in Moscow back in 2002.

Because the agent was dispersed in an ultra-fine powder instead of a gas or a vapor, and developed from a binary agent that mimicked the same properties as perfectly harmless and legal materials that were undetectable by treaty regime inspections, he managed to sneak it into the country before placing it in a bomb that Felicity managed to disarm while Oliver and Anatoly went after him.

Oliver didn’t wind up taking him out though, Anatoly did, proving that the old man still had plenty of juice and that he was still the KGB Beast (even though the KGB supposedly disbanded after the attempted coup to seize control of the government back in 1991).

Technically, she supposed he could’ve updated his handle after the fall of the Iron Curtain by calling himself the FSKBeast or, even better, the FSBeast but, knowing Anatoly, he probably just kept it around for sentimental reasons kind of like Alfred did whenever he trotted out his ‘Beagle’ handle from back when he was with MI-5.

“Man, I know a lot of former spies,” she mused, her fingers pausing on the keyboard. “Actually I know a lot of mobsters, too, not to mention assassins and masked vigilantes…and don’t even get me started on the metahumans, aliens, and dangerous psychopaths,” she said with a slight grimace then
shook her head with a sigh before continuing to type. “Now that’s something to put in the ‘Notable Accomplishments’ section of the MIT newsletter: Felicity Smoak, Class of ’09. Most Underworld Connections and Criminal Associations of any graduate in MIT history. First person in her class to make contact with an alien over cookies and milk.” She paused again, “Probably. Some of those guys I had classes with seemed a little off themselves, so who knows?”

Still, while she never seemed to get to enjoy their spontaneous ‘vacations’ to Russia, the history behind the rise of the Bratva and how they applied to their situation was fascinating...as long as you ignored all the crime and rampant bloodshed.

According to what Anatoly told her, back in the 80’s when the Brotherhood first officially came into being, they were mostly made up of ex-cons and gang members from the Solntsevo District of Moscow.

They made their money from controlling the traffic coming off the M-KAT highway leading to Ukraine, as well as the Vnukovo International Airport. Controlling these transport hubs allowed the Solntsevo group to muscle in on the high-end stolen car import business. Literally millions of dollars’ worth of stolen luxury cars would pass through their hands daily. A Lamborghini stolen off the streets of Beverly Hills would pass through Bratva ports only to wind up in the garage of some Arabian sheik less than a week later.

By the early 1990s, business had gotten so good that the Chechens and the Tambovskaya started muscling in. They were a lot more violent than the Moscow gangs and better trained, as many were former soldiers. They were also better organized and backed up by the FSB. The Solntsevo Bratva weren’t exactly pushovers though.

Together with the Orekhovskaya gang and other Slavic mobs, the Brotherhood formed an alliance to drive the Chechens and their buddies out, resulting in a bloody gang war where the Solntsevo Bratva, surprisingly enough, came out on top becoming the biggest and most powerful crime syndicate of the Russian mafias. They also made a point of learning from their enemies and made sure not to repeat their own mistakes.

By the end of the 1990s, the Solntsevskaya gang started moving into things besides importing stolen cars and transporting contraband. They divided the Brotherhood into four main ‘kingdoms’ or branches headed by the Sovet Vorov. Although, to be honest, they all dabbled in a bit of everything: First was money laundering and cybercrimes, which was currently led by Grisha Mikhilov. While all the ‘Godfathers’ possessed money men, Mikhilov turned it into an art form by perfecting the science of BCE’s and Reverse Money Laundering, putting him in control of literally tens of billions of dollars.

That was why his people were the ones with the most power as they were in charge of most of the Brotherhood’s hedge funds and investments. They were also the ones operating under the least amount of risk as they were classified as ‘white collar criminals’ and rarely served jail time even when they were caught, which wasn’t often. They also tended to have friends in high places. Mikhilov, himself, was not only seen by the general public as a respected businessman and philanthropist, but he was also personal friends with the Russian Prime Minister.

Whenever there was some sort of conflict among the other branches, he usually acted as the arbiter. During Oliver and Anatoly’s ‘trial’, he was the one who served as the head judge and who made sure both men were given the benefit of the doubt despite Ivan Pajari, otherwise known as ‘Little Ivan’ or ‘Ivan the Terrible’, calling for their heads.

Also working in his favor, Mikhilov, unlike Pajari, had been very polite and respectful towards her when they first met so she had the same reluctant stirrings of fondness towards him as she did for
Anatoly. He even offered her a job with his organization before they left and gave her his personal cell phone telling her that, should she ever need anything, to simply call him and he’d do his best to make sure she got it, no questions asked.

She had yet to call that favor in, but she memorized the number just in case.

Next came the Importers, who were run by a man named Nikolai Zolnerowich. They were the old school branch of the Bratva who moved things like cars, guns, exotic animals, and caviar. They were the group Oliver had to negotiate with three years previously when they made their first trip to Moscow in order to break Lyla out of a Russian Gulag. The Importers tended to be tougher and more gun shy than most, especially when dealing with outsiders as their people were often targeted by police investigations. It was why Zolnerowich took great pains to be seen by the general public as a respectable family man who had a special interest in conservation and was a generous contributor to several exotic animal preserves…of course, that was mostly because he enjoyed hunting and eating them.

He also liked using them as enforcers apparently. According to what Anatoly told her, Zolnerowich had a particular fondness for feeding people who pissed him off (for whatever reason) to the hyenas he kept on one of his private reserves.

Yeah, she wasn’t as fond of Zolnerowich as she was of Mikhilov and Anatoly. He wasn’t rude to her but he wasn’t exactly chatty either—not that she was looking to make them Facebook friends any time soon.

However, that and the whole ‘eating endangered animals’ thing aside, it always struck Felicity as odd that Zolnerowich’s branch were the focus of the government’s crackdown on organized crime since, in her mind, Ivan Pajari, that asshole who helped run the Vice trade and who tried to get Oliver executed, should be the one catching the lion’s share of the heat.

Even if she didn’t have a personal grudge against Pajari, her least favorite thing about the Bratva was the fact that a good portion of their business revolved around drugs, gambling, and, most famously, sex slaves—primarily women, but also children and young men. Unfortunately though, the reason slavery was so profitable and low-risk, was the fact that, in many countries, you could get more jail time for selling a stolen car than you could for buying and selling human beings. In some countries, not only was it perfectly legal to buy and sell people, but you could murder them in the middle of the street and get away with it because they were merely property.

It was for that reason and many others that ‘human trafficking’ had become such a buzzword with the general public, and why it was the focus of so many human rights groups these days. It was one of the fastest-growing activities of trans-national criminal organizations today with an annual income of over $33 billion dollars per year.

To put that into perspective, the first time she heard Mama T give a lecture on the subject, she cited the fact that, according to the 1860 U. S. census, 393,975 individuals, representing 8% of all US families, owned 3,950,528 slaves. Of that, one-third of Southern families owned slaves before the Civil War, and purchasing a slave between 1809 and 1860 would have cost a plantation owner the equivalent of around $12,000 to $49,000 for a field hand, and as much as $134,000 in today’s terms for a skilled artisan, depending on their skill level.

In comparison, according to estimates from the International Labour Organization, there are nearly seven and half times more people living as slaves today than there were at the height of slavery in the US. That’s around 29 million people and the global human trafficking industry generates between $32 billion and $91.2 billion annually. The buying and selling of human beings is second only to drug trafficking in terms of global criminal enterprises but, unlike drugs, they can be sold over and
over again and cheaply replaced if they die or are lost in some other way.

That was terrifying but the really scary numbers came from seeing the victims as individuals and not just as these massive, incongruous numbers. At least, that’s how she felt after hearing Mama T say that the average slave sold for approximately $340, with a high of $1,895 for the average trafficked sex slave, and a low of $40 to $50 for debt bondage slaves such as manual laborers who worked in fields, sweat shops, and mining operations all over the globe, including the US and Canada.

In simplest terms, slaves were a cheap investment for maximum return. Feeding them, clothing them, seeing that they received proper medical care…why bother if you can just shell out $40 for a new one after the old one dies?

If that didn’t terrify you, nothing would.

It was because of that, more than the stealing, more than the killing, more than all the rest put together, that she had difficulty accepting the fact that working with Anatoly meant dealing with Bratva. Some claimed that the laws of the Bratva, the rules of honor that declared all members of the organization ‘Thieves-in-law’, meant they were more noble and honorable than other criminals. In fact, some like Anatoly who claimed to be a patriot, called themselves heroes.

“How can a man who kills people, who steals from people, who makes his money by buying human beings and selling them for profit, call himself ‘noble and honorable’? How can that man ever be a hero as long as he bears that stain on his soul?”

That wasn’t her quote, that was Oliver’s. It was something he said to her after all of that came out and she told him he was still a hero to her, no matter his past. It had been a heavy moment for both of them.

She couldn’t erase his stain, or the memories of his past, but she could get a little justice and payback Felicity style.

Vice was technically run by a Pakhan by the name of Semion Mogilevich based out of Hungary although, due to his advanced age and poor health, most of the real day to day running of the organization was handled by his second-in-command and Sovietnik, or ‘Consigliere’, the aforementioned Ivan Pajari. Even though, technically, the Solntsevskaya Bratva don’t involve themselves in human trafficking as dealers, they do buy its victims in order to put them to work in their casinos, restaurants, and brothels making Vice an absolute cash cow for the organization.

It was this branch of the Bratva that likely ran the mining operation where Isabel was used as slave labor and where Oliver’s dad ‘found’ her, yet another reason why Felicity was doing a mental fist pump as she made sure all roads led straight to ‘Ivan the Terrible’s’ door. Her only regret was that she couldn’t do the same to his boss, although she wasn’t exactly letting him go scot-free either.

Mogilevich was unique among the Brotherhood for several reasons, the main one being that he was the only true ‘public’ face of Bratva. He also didn’t limit himself to just controlling Vice even though technically that was the ‘kingdom’ in which he supposedly ruled as Boss of Bosses. He was currently on just about every Most Wanted list in the world for his crimes which ranged from murder and extortion, to selling nuclear material, to slavery, but he also had connections to the highest branches of the Russian government including the office of the Prime Minister.

The closest he ever came to being arrested was in Moscow in 2008, for suspected tax evasion. Despite being on the FBI’s Most Wanted List and the US threatening sanctions if he wasn’t turned over to them for his part in a five billion dollar fraud case, his bail was placed and, upon his release, the Russian Interior Minister stated that the charges against him were ‘not of a particularly grave
nature’ and let him go with a slap on the wrist.Shortly thereafter he was seen canoodling at the club with Putin and his cronies, adopting an attitude with the press along the lines of, ‘no harm, no foul’.

For that and many other reasons, whenever Team Arrow would target Bratva it was usually ops associated with the vice trade and today would be no exception. She smiled triumphantly as she entered the final keystroke and watched as the money in Mogilevich’s secret and not-so secret accounts dwindled and faded to nothing, along with several of Pajari’s and their clients.

She didn’t completely bankrupt Pajari though—not technically, she thought with wicked relish. She actually bulked up several of the ones he held that his boss did know about, and only depleted the accounts he received from ‘skimming off the top’, the ones that Pajari obviously thought only he knew about. She also added a few lines of code making his pocketing from the company till more noticeable and made sure that when people came looking, the Italians, the Triads, and the Bratva, that it would be for Pajari’s head on a spike and no one else’s.

However, she had no doubt that his boss would have to do a lot of explaining to do before The Council of Thieves as well despite his current state of ‘semi-retirement’, and she imagined (even though she’d never met him) that Mogilevich was not the kind of guy who enjoyed explaining himself to anyone so Pajari was going to have to do a lot of running very, very soon.

“That’s what you get for referring to me as Anatoly’s ‘second-best bitch’, asshole,” she said with particular relish. “For your information, I’m number one at being Head Bitch in Charge and you just got pwned!”

While she didn’t choose him as a target *just* because he insulted her (along with the even nastier things to Sara), it did add a certain something to her usual sense of a job well done, she had to admit. She’s waited almost a year to take down Ivan, her plan in place, just biding her time until she needed the money for something special. Until the Birds happened she thought about buying her own satellite but that seemed like such a waste considering she could just jack ARGUS’s any time she wanted. Felicity didn’t know what she would have eventually bought with the money, put she saw all her patience and hard work as sitting on her piggy bank, just letting Pajari’s ill-gotten gains accrue plenty of interest, as the perfect tack to take until the right moment presented itself. All that hard work and delayed gratification was one of the reasons she chose to break with Team Arrow tradition and keep the spoils of war for herself instead of donating them to some other good cause.

Usually when she would bankrupt crooks, she would divert the funds to a legitimate charity like the Moira Queen Glades Fund in Starling or her brother’s African mission, but today she was going to celebrate her blow for women everywhere by officially kicking off the Birds of Prey with a ‘charity’ of their own. Technically she supposed she should feel a little bit guilty for stealing the money, but she didn’t. Once they took down Orbital and Talia, they’d need the money to keep the mission going and she didn’t want to have to ask Bruce for it.

“And, boy howdy, that much money should keep us in black leather and pointy things for a while,” she whistled lowly as she saw the many, many zeroes scroll by before diverting some of it into an account for Helena. She then hacked various credit card companies in order to establish a long term credit history, and printed those off as well. The rest of the funds she split into two separate accounts; one for the mission in order to buy things like weapons and take care of their overhead, and one for more personal incidentals for things like bills or clothes that any one of them could access if they needed to.

Designing Helena’s bank cards were easy, she just copied the design the bank would have issued her, then embossed the card with the account numbers, before programming in her account information. They looked absolutely real because, despite being made in the FelicityCave, they were
real and they were attached to accounts with real money in them.

Also, she wasn’t handing Helena all that money as a gift. As far as she was concerned, despite the crimes Helena committed as Huntress, this was money owed to her for the losses she suffered. Also, in order to back up the identity she created for her, Helena would need those funds in order to appear legit.

But for the Birds as a whole? There she got to be creative.

The nicest part of the card printer (besides being able to make up her own credit cards) was the fact that she could design them with pictures of anything she wanted. It felt a little like impulse buying a kid’s coloring book and crayons as an adult, then spending Sunday in bed scribbling away like a kid again.

Did she ever do that?

…no comment, except to say that she really, really liked coloring books as a kid and the apparently made them for adults now.

Not that she owned any…

…not since Bruce and Oliver wrecked her house anyway.

It didn’t even take her a minute to decide on the design she wanted either. Taking Sara’s suggestion of making ‘Samantha Spade’ their team mascot, she found an art deco-stylized picture of a Peregrine falcon then used the same layout as the Centurion on Bruce’s AmEx Black by darkening it to a silhouette before placing it against a bright metallic gold ‘moon’. The last thing she did was choose a glossy black background in order to make the gold ‘pop’. Maybe it was a little obvious, especially after Lance’s ‘Zorro’ comments to Bruce, but it did look very professional if she did say so herself (not to mention flipping cool), and this way her people could get whatever they needed without having to ask her or use their own resources since ‘vigilante expenses’ weren’t exactly tax delectable.

“If only,” she sighed.

Besides, while she had no doubt that she and Bruce would work things out sooner rather than later (once she got over being pissed), there was something to be said for financial independence. After all, ‘He who has the gold, makes the rules,’ and if Bruce was the one funding the Birds then he would want to be the one making the decisions for them. She didn’t want that and she knew the other members of her team wouldn’t want that either, so stealing from the mob and using that money to take on missions they felt needed taking on rather than risk becoming the Bat’s B-Squad seemed to her like a no brainer. While neither Bruce or Oliver would be happy with how she chose to fund her mission, at least this way justice was served and she had a good time doing it.

“Besides, I’m not exactly planning on telling them, am I?” She said to herself with a smirk.

As she systematically drained the last of Mogilevich and Zolnerowitch’s accounts in the background (according to what she’d learned last year, Zolnerowitch and Pajari had a particularly unpleasant personal history so this should be extra fun to watch as it played out)—

“Hope the hyenas don’t get a belly ache,” she muttered.

--she started to work on the ‘identity’ part of her little project.

Felicity was particularly good at finding and planting new identities. It was one of the first ‘fun’ things Barbara taught her when she became her Padawan, even though it did have a bit of a grim
side to it.

Bruce used several aliases as the Bat, all of them more than capable of withstanding even NSA scrutiny, so Barbara knew all of the tricks and then some and she taught them all to her.

The most obvious and common way to build a new identity was to take over an old one but that was also the easiest way to get caught. It left a paper trail and two people using the same social security number tended to get noticed eventually. A lot of low-level forgers would use the birth records of a still-born child or infant in order to build a history but that was also so common a practice that it was the first thing most cops looked at during an investigation.

The way Barbara taught her was a bit more complicated but far superior to those other methods, especially since she’d spent the last several years building backdoors into various high-level government agencies like ARGUS who always kept lots of lovely brand new Social Security numbers around, just ripe for the picking, and that always checked out as 100% legitimate no matter who was looking or how hard they dug.

Amanda tended not to play well with others, especially the NSA, and she didn’t like relying on other agencies for favors, or sharing her assets and info with anyone.

“Speaking of…” she muttered as she slipped past their firewalls in order to ‘borrow’ a few things, before shutting the virtual door behind her. “Hate to say it, Amanda, but Mordred was right,” she said with a cluck of her tongue. “Next time you hire a hacker you should be more worried about their skill level than their haircut.”

The next bit of her Build-A-Bird Workshop was the hard part, at least it was for her. Hacking into several different police databases simultaneously by using an algorithm which filtered the results based on the physical description and blood type she was looking for, she began the arduous task of manually going through the pictures of homicide victims that had been officially listed by the authorities as ‘Jane Doe’s’ and whose remains had already been disposed of.

There were a lot but not as many as you’d suppose. Still…

Five years and I’ll never get used to this part of the job, she thought as her eyes took in the battered and abused autopsy photos of those poor unknown women. All of them so young, so beautiful, and gone much too soon.

How many of those women were sex slaves; victims of human trafficking bought and sold by men like Pajari for less than, what? Delivery from her favorite Italian place?

That was chilling; this woman was made a slave and lost her life because she had less value as a human being than pizza and cheesy breadsticks.

Her stomach lurched at the thought so, pushing that to the back of her mind, she began to type.

She took a deep breath, Barbara’s words echoing in her mind:

“The first step to building a rock solid new identity, Chickie, begins with killing the old one.”

With just the press of a button, Helena Bertinelli would be officially declared dead, her body mutilated and found floating off the coast of Sicily. According to the Sicilian authorities, Helena’s mob hunting activities finally caught up to her as she was killed execution style with two bullets to the back of the head. Her fingerprints and dental records could not be used to identify her due to advanced decomposition and predation, along with perimortem trauma consistent with torture. Due to a backlog of DNA samples along with interagency red tape, the body could not be identified.
before cremation.

“However, as of right now—” she hit the key, sending the file to the FBI, Interpol, and every other law enforcement agency in the world with an open case against her, along with a Trojan that would slowly gobble up her personal information every time someone tried to access it, starting with her fingerprints and mugshot “—may she rest in peace.”

She took another moment to silently contemplate the girl who now bore Helena’s name, before beginning step two of the process; building a new human from the ground up.

She chose to start with a clean identity, one of her own making, while using the ARGUS certified Social they had no idea didn’t belong to them anymore.

Nor would they ever know, Felicity thought. She made sure to clean up after herself afterwards so, unless ARGUS had a guy who remembered every single number and checked on them constantly, they’d never even miss it.

She was so used to stopping by ARGUS to borrow a cup of information that by now she had pretty much developed the attitude of, ‘What’s yours is mine’, be it a satellite, a Social Security Number, and on one very memorable occasion, she made them buy her new shoes by hacking into Amanda’s expense account. Actually, it wasn’t just shoes, it was a whole new outfit and the shoes were Manalo’s. She felt it was completely justified since, in her opinion, it was her fault they got ruined in the first place.

“I really loved those shoes,” she murmured.

Sara and Barbara both had their theories on how to build a solid cover story, but she preferred the sage advice Alfred gave her long ago.

It happened when she asked once about his time in MI-5 and why he would choose a handle like ‘Beagle’. He told her that he wasn’t the one who chose it, his handler did, and the reason they picked it was because they thought he looked like their childhood pet, all floppy ears and an earnest expression. He’d kept it because it was easy to remember, simple as that.

“If someone used the code word, ‘Beagle’, I would automatically react to it. However, if I gave in to narcissism and changed it to something more daring like, say, ‘Nightstalker’, I might be slow to react and that could cause my contact to lose faith in me and possibly endanger my life. It takes approximately twenty-eight days to form a habit,” he told her. “That was twenty-eight days I didn’t have the luxury of having so why would I risk my life to fix what wasn’t broken merely for vanity’s sake?”

Habit. We answer to the names we’re given because it’s habit. It doesn’t matter who you are or how down you’ve got your identity, your first instinct will always be to react when you hear your own name even if you aren’t the one being spoken to. It was the reason why so many people wound up breaking cover. If your name was Ben but you were pretending to be Jerry, you would answer to Jerry every time but you’d still instinctively turn to look if someone called out for a guy named ‘Ben’.

Her stomach growled at that and she sighed, “Aw man, I really should’ve made a sandwich before coming down here. Who knew stealing billions of dollars from the mob could work up an appetite,” she muttered shaking her head with a frown. “I’ve really got to order some stuff for the cave if people are going to be using this place regularly. First thing on the list after a coffeepot?” She pointed to the right side of the workstation without looking, “Mini-fridge and microwave.” She paused, “Maybe I’ll even splurge a little and go ahead and install a whole little kitchenette and lounge. I
mean, what the hell? We can afford it now.”

In any case, it was for that reason that she decided Helena would be keeping her name. That, and the fact that she was in the mood for revenge. She was going to get a little payback while completely pissing off both Bruce and Helena, she smirked.

Next on her list was building up a history, one piece of red tape at a time. Switzerland was a good place to start. Not only were the Swiss good with watches, but they were also good at data entry, especially when it came to things like birth and medical records. Even in the States and throughout Canada, some counties still relied on hard copies and file cabinets, but Switzerland was far enough away that people wouldn’t want to wait for certified copies to be sent via snail mail and, since everything was already online, most would be satisfied with an email or a PDF file. If not, then hard copies get misfiled every day, even in Switzerland.

Another reason she chose Switzerland is because Helena actually did attend boarding school there, a very exclusive one; Le Rosey. She imagined her parents chose it, not only for the curriculum, but for the security and privacy the school provided. Their firewalls were surprisingly solid for a school (not that they kept her out) in order to protect the identities of their students, and they catered to the wealthy and elite so the campus, while idyllic, was well-guarded and it wasn’t unusual for the students to have personal security officers in tow.

Despite her tough talk and streetwise attitude, the other woman really had been raised to be Daddy’s Little Princess…although that went really bad, really fast. All she had to do was run a comprehensive search then set things up so that whenever the name ‘Bertinelli’ was mentioned in conjunction with Helena’s picture or records, it would be changed to her new name.

Again, why change every detail when you can change just one?

As she worked, her mind flashed back to the faces of all those poor women whose murders had long gone cold. That, along with the rest of the Gala talk they’d been subjected to that morning, made her think about Daniel again. Actually, it made her think of both Daniel and Ray, along with the two women they’d both loved and lost under the most tragic of circumstances.

It also wasn’t one she cared to rehash at the moment. Not only didn’t she feel like mentally reliving her disastrous history with Daniel during her Happy Zen Forgery Time, she also didn’t want to look too closely at how the story he told her about his girlfriend’s death and finding the Blue Beetle connected with some of the information J’onn shared with them.

When he first told her about it, Felicity had been just as clueless as Daniel about how to explain what happened to them, but following her own experience with the Omega Device and combined with the story J’onn had told them the other day, she had her suspicions. If Daniel’s scarab was some sort of alien tech then it might account for what he had experienced in the tomb. She’d have to mention it to J’onn later and, if he confirmed that it could have some connection to the Omega Device…well, she might just be calling Daniel on his private cell after all, if only to set up a meet between him and J’onn.

Felicity sighed and ran her hand over her hair before rolling her neck wearily. While she knew that was yet another thing she’d have to deal with sooner rather than later, she just didn’t want to—not yet. The last thing she needed right now is to add another handsome bastard who swung from the rooftops to her romantic roster.

“Although, to be fair, he mostly just flies around in that stupid looking blue bug jet thing,” she said wryly.
Not that they were all that romantic, truth be told. If she were to be completely honest, while she found him very, very attractive, she was never in any danger of falling in love with him. She liked him, found him sexually intriguing, but a relationship never once even crossed her mind. She didn’t know if she would have acted on those feelings if Oliver hadn’t barged into their date like that but, for a few minutes anyway, it had been nice to go out on a (almost) date with a guy who wasn’t Oliver or Bruce and who was able to smile at her in a way that made her inner thighs tingle.

“And then he drew the asshole card…” she said roundly.

Still, if that experience had taught her one thing, it was that she definitely had a type; she fell for men that were handsome, commanding, heroic, and who had a tragic personal history that led to their heads being perpetually shoved up their own asses.

Her cell buzzed and she glanced at it.

“Speak of the devil.”

Great.

“Oh well, at least I got to enjoy a few hours in peace,” she said with a sigh as she moved to pick it up then paused. “Wait a minute; nuh uh.” She hit ignore, “Tell it to voicemail because I told you not to call me, remember? Not that I ever check my voicemail,” she added a little meanly.

Okay, maybe that was a little childish, and yes, she had to talk to Bruce eventually…and Oliver…and Daniel, whether he showed up to the Gala or not, but she was loathe to let her newly created angst-free bubble of calm go just yet, something that would definitely be happening once she had to deal with him.

“Besides,” she burst out, “it felt really good today doing my own thing without him or Oliver hanging over my shoulder and looking at me with those broody ‘grr’ faces they’ve perfected after years of misery and buttheadedness.”

Being with the Birds today had cheered her immensely. No one interrogated her about her relationship, instead they just welcomed her into the conversation and hung out. And it *had* been nice to just hang out with her girls instead of getting mired down in a huge manpain-ridden mess of guilt and frustration. It was also nice to be able to do something constructive with her time without having to deal those hangdog looks of theirs that made it seem like she was in the wrong when they were the ones who screwed up.

Making a quick decision, she decided that procrastination was the better part of valor and turned her phone off entirely after he began sending her rapid fire texts to call him back. Oliver and Bruce would have their drama whether she was there to add to it or not, and she’d put off talking to Daniel this long, she could wait a little longer. If he showed up at the Gala, she’d be polite and to the point, hand him J’onn’s information so he could deal with him (yes, cowardice thy name is Felicity), then move on because adding another piece to an already crowded chess game was not something she had any intentions of doing. She’d merely let him know that she had information to share at a later date and then deal with him once Orbital had been taken care of. If he didn’t show…

Well then, bully for her because she was overstocked in the assholes in masks department anyway.

With that settled, she decided to finish working on her projects. There were other things she could have been working on, more productive things, things that should have taken precedence perhaps, but this was a stress free zone and she was not going to mess that up.
Although feeling the burn was pretty much unavoidable, she admitted reluctantly. Everything around her reminded her of Bruce. It was, after all, his secondary Cave and his equipment she was using, but it was far enough removed from him that she could lose herself in the rhythm of her work, for a little while at least. Hacking, data mining, running code; they were her meditation in the same way the Wing Chun dummy and Salmon Ladder was Oliver’s, or the way the escrima sticks were Diggle’s.

She purposefully lost herself in the click-clack of the keys and in the music she was piping through the speakers that had long since become background noise. It didn’t even matter what was playing, really. It was just noise filling in the space that would normally be occupied by the rest of her team as they worked out and prepared to go to battle. It wasn’t until the sound of the elevator broke her concentration that she even heard the lyrics being sung in gruff, plaintive tones.

//Open it up and let me inside, show me all the proof you hide. Evidence underneath your skin, the secrets that you keep within. Stone face but your heart belongs with me. I ain't gonna tell no one I got your garden and your gun. Your bitters and your sweets, breathe me out, breathe me in. I ain't gonna let you down, I ain't gonna let you down//

“That’s…yeah, pretty song but definitely not the kind of thing I really need to be listening to right now,” she muttered as she turned down the volume. Especially since she was definitely feeling let down, not to mention a bit bitter. She turned her chair towards the elevator just as Laurel stepped out. Forcing a cheerful expression on her face, she asked, “Bored with hot yoga already?”

The other woman snorted, “Yeah, well, hot yoga lasted all of a hot minute before Creote’s lord and master got up from his nap and started complaining that we were smothering him with the excessive heat and disturbing his rest with our—how did he put it?” She mused, pursing her lips, “Incessant caterwauling. After that the party pretty much broke up.”

Her lips twitched upwards at that, “So you came down here to caterwaul with me instead?”

“Actually, I came down here to let you know that Tam had a ton of gowns brought over for us to go through and to remind you that you might want to go visit your stepmom before we have to head down to the salon.”

“But it’s only…” she glanced at the time, “crap,” she muttered.

“Yeah, you’ve been down here almost three hours,” Laurel said dryly. “What have you been working on anyway?”

“A few things,” she said with a sigh. “Which reminds me.” She picked up one of the files she’d been working on and handed it to her.

Laurel took it then looked inside curiously, “What’s this?”

“I know you said you wanted to do it the hard way, but we might not have time for that so I went ahead and renewed your license and got you certified to practice in this state,” Felicity told her. “I also went ahead and cleaned up your records so…”

“Felicity…” She looked up at her with a furrowed brow, “You know you didn’t have to do this, right?”

“I know,” she told her, “and you don’t have to use it if you don’t want to, but I knew that getting through all the red tape the old fashioned way might take a while and I figured that sitting idle wasn’t
really your style. At least if you’re working on your down time, even part time, it would give you something to do and help out with your recovery. I’m sure Renee knows some Legal-Aid offices you could help out at or maybe, after we take down Orbital, you guys could share an office or something; you two could be the crusading young attorney and her enterprising investigator by day and a pair of kick ass lady masks by night. Oh, and look at the credit card I made us.”

“Credit…?” She sorted through the banded together cards, her eyebrows raising slightly in surprise, “Cool logo; is this for the team?”

“Yup,” she said, happily popping her ‘p’.

“That’s going to look awesome on the jerseys. Is it real?” She asked her.

“Yup,” she said again.

“You didn’t wipe out Bruce’s bank accounts, did you?” She asked carefully. “Because he’s called the Nest like three times in the last ten minutes asking to speak to you because you apparently turned off your phone.”

“It was tempting, but no,” she said with a slight upturn of her lips.

“So where…?” She asked leadingly.

“Stole it from the mob,” Felicity said easily. “The Italians, the Triad, a ton of it came from the Bratva,” she shrugged. “We are now very, very well-funded. We’re talking Batman kind of funded.” She grinned toothily, “I was feeling rather motivated.”

“I’ll just bet! Cool, now we don’t have to use Bruce’s card for everything.” she chuckled, her expression lighting up at that. “Plus, Helena will get a special kick out of the fact that you ‘Smoaked’ the mob with your patented ‘Bitch with Wi-Fi’ thing. Thank you,” she told her, obviously touched.

“You’re welcome. Oh, and you can drive now so we should probably divert some team funds and get you a car of your own,” she shrugged.

“Or I could just keep the minivan?” The other woman said slowly.

Felicity looked at her askance, “You really want my minivan that badly?”

“Well, I have driven it more than you have plus it has a built in *vacuum cleaner*,” she emphasized. “Back in Starling I kept a mini Dust Buster in my center console so that van is like everything my Type A personality ever wanted in a vehicle and more.” She paused, “Plus, on the off-chance I do team up with Renee she can play video games in the back seat.”

“Fine,” she sighed. “We’ll go back to the dealership on Monday to get something else for me and you can keep the van.”

“Why not just use one of Bruce’s cars?” Laurel asked curiously, “I mean, I know we’re mob-rich now but Lord knows he has enough of them, he can afford to spare at least one. When Renee took me over there to pick out a bike I thought we’d made a wrong turn and wound up in a high end car dealership instead.”

“I’m not really interested in asking Bruce for any favors right now, thanks,” she said dourly.

“Yeah, I got that feeling after he called the third time and told us that somebody better go downstairs to make sure you hadn’t hit your head or something,” she hummed as she sat down on the corner of
the workstation, “Want to talk about it?”

“I thought we needed to head upstairs?” She asked, neatly sidestepping the question.

The other woman pulled a face, “Yeah, well, I’d rather stay down here and hide with you instead.”

“I’m not—” she started then sighed, “Okay, fine; I’m hiding, okay? I know why I’m avoiding everybody, why’re you?”

“Shea hates me,” she said glumly without meeting her eyes.

“Shea doesn’t hate you,” she immediately denied.

Laurel raised her eyebrows at that, “Shea hasn’t said a word to me since she got here.”

“Yes, she did.”

“No, she didn’t,” the other woman said firmly. “She hasn’t even looked at me since they got here.”

Felicity’s eyebrows drew together at that, “She said something to you this morning at breakfast, didn’t she?”

“Yeah,” Laurel huffed wryly, “she said, ‘Please pass the salt’.”

“Oh.” Felicity bit her lip, “Um, so did you try talking to her?”

“A few times,” Laurel said with a sigh. “Every time I said something she either turned to someone else or just looked right through me.” Her mouth tightened in consternation, “I mean, I’ve tried to apologize to her a million times already, I wrote her a note, I even tried cornering her upstairs and assured her that you’d forgiven me, but she won’t even look at me! I know I can’t make her forgive me, I get that, but…” she let out a ragged breath, her hands tightening where they rested on her knees as she hung her head wearily, “I don’t know, I just need to—to put that period of my life behind me and I can’t do that until I can get some closure. Even if she never forgives me I at least want her to tell me that and know that she heard me out at least once before she cuts me out of her life forever.”

She looked up at Felicity with shame filled eyes, “Back when Ollie and I were first together, Shea and I were so close and then the boat happened.” Her lips tightened again, “I stopped coming around, obviously, and after Shea got involved in drugs I got her to do her community service at CNRI partly because I felt guilty for just abandoning her like that.”

She swung her legs back and forth slightly as she gathered her thoughts, “It wasn’t Shea’s fault that Ollie cheated on me, she’d lost her brother, too, not to mention her dad, but I was just so angry and my dad started drinking heavily.” Laurel cast her eyes towards the floor, “It was a dark time for us. He practically accused me of killing Sara by bringing Ollie into our lives. It got…” her breath hitched slightly and she blew it out slowly, “bad between us.”

“Your dad did that?” Felicity asked in surprise.

“Addiction takes you to some pretty dark places,” she said with a sad smile. “He said some pretty harsh stuff, called me a ‘gold digger’ and told me I was a sell out who was so hung up on becoming the wife of a billionaire that I was willing to give up everything I believed in. He wasn’t completely wrong,” she said with a shrug. “That’s the other thing about addiction, it makes it possible to say all the hateful, hurtful stuff that you would normally avoid saying out loud but that you’re secretly thinking about.” Laurel inhaled again sharply, her spine stiffening, “Which you totally know about since I did the same thing to you.”
“Vodka under the bridge, remember?” Felicity told her, waving her off.

“Thanks,” she said with a melancholy look before dropping her eyes. “Like I said, he wasn’t totally wrong. I did stay with Ollie even though I knew he’d cheated on me time and time again, and it wasn’t just because I thought I was in love with him. I wanted to have a meaningful life, I wanted to change the world, and, yeah, being the wife of the grandson of John Jonas Deardon,” she shook her head. “It would have been like marrying into the Kennedy’s and I wanted to be the next Hilary Clinton someday.”

“You were a kid, Laurel,” Felicity told her. “You made mistakes, got caught up in your own headspace, did some stupid shit, but that doesn’t make you a bad person. When you fell down you got yourself back up and you’re fighting to make up for those mistakes every day. Like I heard someone say in a movie once, ‘Two tears in a bucket; mother fuck it.’”

Laurel burst out into a surprised laugh at that then reached out to squeeze her shoulder gratefully, “Again; thanks, and you’re right; mother fuck it!” She said with a certain amount of relish, then paused, “But while that might work for mistakes I made with Ollie when I was twenty-one, everything since then is on me and I need to make amends for that. I drank, I used drugs, I made those decisions, no one else, and part of my coming to terms with that is apologizing to Thea but I can’t do that if she won’t talk to me.”

“Making amends doesn’t mean just getting people’s forgiveness,” Felicity told her, “From what your dad used to tell me, it’s also about learning to forgive yourself and doing right by the people you hurt whether they forgive you or not.”

“I know that,” Laurel sighed, “I know that I can’t make her talk to me but I just…” She looked at her with pleading eyes, “Could you just talk to her for me? Please? You don’t have to argue my case or anything, just tell her I’m sorry and that I’m really trying this time and that, when she’s ready, I’d like to apologize to her face to face.”

Felicity’s brow furrowed as she considered her request, “Okay, I’ll talk to her but I can’t make her do anything. Thea’s pretty stubborn and definitely knows how to hold a grudge. I mean, she once shot Oliver with an arrow, remember.”

“Yeah, but she was brainwashed,” the other woman said jokingly then shrugged, “Then again, her aim might be better without the drugs. I know mine is.” They both laughed at that before Laurel nodded at her gratefully, “I know you hate it when I say ‘thank you’ every five seconds, but thanks,” she told her, then grinned, “And while I’d prefer not to get shot, you can let her know that she’s welcome to punch me in the face if that’s what it takes.”

“I’ll let her know,” Felicity said dryly then gathered up the second file and the envelope with the cards she’d prepared. “Ready to go upstairs so I can enjoy not calling Bruce back for a little while longer?”

“I could be up for that,” Laurel nodded, “Let’s go pick out our gowns for the ball, shall we?”

“Gowns for the ball?” Felicity repeated skeptically, “So what does that make me? Belle or Sleeping Beauty?”

“I don’t know who it makes you but I’m pretty sure I’m the wicked stepsister, at least according to most people,” Laurel joked half-heartedly.

“Naw,” she said playfully as she bumped her with her shoulder just as they entered the lift, “That’s Helena’s job now.”
“‘Now’,” she repeated. “Good to know that ‘now’ I’m no longer the designated team bitch,” she said wryly as she hit the button.

Felicity grinned, "Yeah, I figured that'd cheer you up."

"Totally."

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